



## **The Role of Human Resource Systems in Job Applicant Decision Processes**

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*Given that organizations make choices about how to manage their human resources, information about the organization is often expressed or implied in the human resource systems that organizations implement. This study proposes that information conveyed through human resource systems affects applicant job choices, that particular systems will be more important to some people than to others, and that job acceptance will be influenced by the degree to which individual characteristics match the content of the system information presented. A policy-capturing design was used to assess the effects of human resource systems within the context of other variables that past research has shown to significantly influence job choices. Results suggested support for the importance of human resource systems in job choice decisions, and further suggested that the fit between individual characteristics and organizational settings described by these systems may be particularly important determinants of job acceptance.*

For several years staffing experts have been suggesting that an organization's human resource (HR) systems might be instrumental in the staffing decisions made by organizations and the job choice decisions made by applicants (e.g., Olian & Rynes, 1984; Rynes, 1992). Although this thesis is endemic to staffing research, it is particularly salient in discussions of strategic staffing and person-organization fit. Strategic staffing can be described as recruiting and selection activities that are derived from a systematic assessment of the organization's strategic objectives and needs (Butler, Ferris & Napier, 1991). Strategic staffing activities are undertaken to procure long-term human assets, not merely to fulfill immediate operational objectives (Miller, 1984). Likewise, person-organization fit addresses the suitability or propriety of certain types of people in particular types of organizational environments, with the assumption that this match has long-term implications for organizational effectiveness (Schneider, 1987). Differences in HR systems presumably reflect the underlying nature of

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organizations, and therefore, in the staffing context, provide an environmental context for determinations of fit.

The term HR systems refers to the collection of policies, practices, and procedures that delineate how particular HR functions are practiced in a specific organization (Bretz, Ash & Dreher, 1989). For example, reward systems include those activities that determine how pay and other rewards are distributed to organizational members (Gerhart & Milkovich, 1992), mobility systems are the mechanisms by which individuals move into, through, and out of organizations (Rosenbaum, 1984; Sonnenfeld & Peiperl, 1988), justice systems refer to the degree to which fairness is emphasized in organizational procedures and in the distribution of outcomes (Folger & Greenberg, 1985; Greenberg, 1990), and work/family systems are the collection of policies upon which an organization relies to accommodate work/family conflicts (Friedman & Galinsky, 1992).

To the extent that strategic objectives drive the firm's HR systems, organizations reveal important contextual information in the systems they choose to implement (Olian & Rynes, 1984). Therefore, knowledge of the organization's HR systems should impact job seekers' decision-making processes. However, although many have theorized about their potential effect on job choices, little is actually known about how job applicants interpret HR system differences between organizations, or how this information relates to perceptions of person-organization fit.

Early attempts to describe pre-hire perceptions of fit (e.g., Burke & Deszca, 1982; Tom, 1971) mainly relied on theories of vocational choice (e.g., Holland, 1966; Super, 1953). The extension of the vocational choice literature to the organizational choice context suggests that accepted theories of person-*environment* fit are relevant in the organizational choice context and appear to explain some of the variance in organizational choice decisions. Recent examination of person-*organization* fit has focused on fit at the post-hire stage (e.g., Blau, 1987; Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1990; French, Caplan & Harrison, 1982; Kulik, Oldham & Hackman, 1987; Meglino, Ravlin & Adkins, 1989; Moos, 1987; O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991; Rounds, Dawis & Lofquist, 1987). However, a few studies have attempted to assess the degree to which perceived person-organization fit affects job choice behavior. For example, Bretz et al. (1989) found some support for the hypothesis that the valence of an organization's reward system to an individual depended on the personality of the individual. Similarly, Judge and Bretz (1992) found that organizational values were an important determinant of job choices and that individuals preferred jobs in organizations which displayed value preferences similar to their own. Finally, Rynes, Bretz and Gerhart (1991) content analyzed in-depth interviews with job seekers and concluded that applicants assess fit on the basis of job characteristics, organizational practices, recruiter attributes, and recruiting process activities.

Thus, it seems that applicants do form judgments about the desirability of particular organizations on the basis of at least some of its HR systems. Despite this research, however, the assessment of organizational fit by job applicants remains largely a mystery. Although we have an indication that reward systems, mobility systems, and value systems influence opinions about the relative attractiveness of organizations, we do not know the weight that

applicants place on these types of variables, or the degree to which individual differences interact with these variables to influence job choice behavior. The current study is an attempt to directly assess these issues in the context of other variables that are known to affect job choices.

### Hypotheses

Organizations tend to differentiate themselves on the bases of what is rewarded (both formally and informally) and how rewards are distributed (Gerhart & Milkovich, 1990). Reward systems can be based on employee merit, longevity, or output (Milkovich & Newman, 1987), or may be described by their focus on either the individual, the group, or the organization (Staw, 1986). For example, individually-oriented reward systems attempt to create strong instrumentality linkages between performance and rewards by relying on the archetypical "merit system," but group-oriented reward systems design work and distribute rewards on the basis of group performance. Reward system characteristics reflect fundamental differences in what the organization deems valuable, and how it chooses to distribute resources among its members. Expectancy theory may be relevant in understanding how reward systems influence job choice decisions.

Expectancy theory considers the attractiveness of alternative jobs as a function of the perceived instrumentalities and valences associated with each of the alternatives (Vroom, 1964). Reward systems that are considered most attractive will be those in which the applicant believes that his/her performance will lead to positively valent outcomes. Human resource system information that creates stronger instrumentality linkages should lead to higher levels of attractiveness. Individually-oriented reward systems could create stronger instrumentalities than group-oriented reward systems due to the individualistic (as opposed to collectivistic) nature of American work values (Cable, 1993). This is evidenced by the fact that when compared to workers in other countries, workers in the United States place a higher value on individual effort rewards, and lower values on group participation and output (MOW International Research Team, 1987). Thus, while for some individuals group or team-based reward systems may be attractive, for most individuals they will be less attractive because of the individualism extant in American culture. Moreover, person-organization fit assumes that individual differences will moderate the degree to which any *particular person* finds individually-oriented reward systems attractive. Individually-oriented merit systems should be most attractive to individuals who prefer to work independently of others while group-based reward distribution systems should be preferred by individuals who are predisposed to work in cooperative settings (Bretz et al., 1989). Therefore, we hypothesized that:

**H1:** *Individuals characterized by a preference for individual work and contribution will be more likely than those characterized by a preference for team-based work and contribution to prefer jobs in organizations with individually-oriented reward systems.*

Additionally, although mobility in organizations often is accompanied by increases in compensation (Gerhart & Milkovich, 1990), the mobility system itself can have independent motivating characteristics (Markham, Harlan & Hackett, 1987). Sonnenfeld and Peiperl (1988) defined career systems as, "collections of policies, priorities, and actions that organizations use to manage the flow of their members into, through, and out of the organization over time" (p. 588). Turner (1960) described mobility systems as either contest-oriented or sponsored-oriented. Under a contest norm, upward mobility is the result of victory in a fair and open contest. Promotions are made on the basis of recent performance. Therefore, those who excelled in the past must continue to compete for further promotions and those who lost in prior rounds are not disadvantaged in the current competition (Bretz & Dreher, 1988). In contrast, mobility under a sponsorship norm relies on early identification of those possessing certain characteristics. This select group is afforded different career opportunities than the non-sponsored cohort (Bretz & Dreher, 1988). The most obvious examples of sponsored mobility systems are organizational "fast tracks" and internal promotion policies (Rosenbaum, 1984).

Because contest mobility systems make valent outcomes (promotions) contingent on individual performance, and such individualism tends to be highly valued in American culture, instrumentalities may be stronger in contest than in sponsored mobility systems. Therefore, contest mobility systems may be expected to appeal to a greater proportion of individuals. Once again, however, conceptualizations of fit dictate that this proposition be tempered by individual characteristics. Sponsored mobility systems describe a situation in which the future elite are chosen by the established elite on the basis of predetermined criteria, and those who do not possess the distinguishing characteristics cannot earn them through any amount of skill or effort (Turner, 1960). Because the future elite are identified early in their careers and "sponsored" into elite status, in many ways their career success is beyond their control. Conversely, contest mobility systems never really bestow elite status and require reaffirmations of one's ability through repeated competitions for promotions. In this sense, one's career progression is completely determined by one's own ability and effort vis-a-vis others in the cohort. Internal locus of control describes individuals who tend to believe that they have significant control over what happens to them, and external locus of control describes individuals who tend to believe that the things that happen to them are caused by events beyond their control (Rotter, 1966). Because contest mobility systems place one's career progression squarely on one's own shoulders, and sponsored mobility systems effectively remove direct control over career progression, we hypothesized that:

**H2:** *Individuals with high internal locus of control will be more likely than those with low internal locus of control to prefer jobs in organizations with contest mobility systems.*

In addition to HR systems pertaining to specific human resource functions (i.e., compensation, staffing), they might also include sets of policies and

practices that are endemic to the organization and cut across functional boundaries. For example, work values represent a subset of social values that suggest general patterns of behavior individuals ought to exhibit at work (Fallding, 1965; Rokeach, 1973). Recent research has revealed that achievement, concern for others, honesty, and fairness are the most salient work values to most individuals (Ravlin & Meglino, 1987). Although these values seem to be universally important, individuals express differences regarding their relative importance, and appear to choose jobs based on the degree to which organizational values match personal values (Judge & Bretz, 1992). Some past research has indicated that fairness is the most important work value to individuals (Judge & Bretz, 1992).

Because work values generally are considered to be universally desirable (Fallding, 1965; Locke, 1976), organizational systems that encourage or insure commonly held values should be preferable to organizational environments that are contrary to or ignore such values. In fact, it has been shown that individual's impressions of organizations, job satisfaction, and intention to turnover are significantly related to perceptions of justice (Alexander & Ruderman, 1987; Lind & Tyler, 1988). Researchers have made a distinction between distributive justice—the fairness of outcomes achieved, and procedural justice—the fairness of means used to achieve those ends (Greenberg, 1987). The importance of distributive justice to individuals can be explained by the “self-interest model,” which suggests that distributive justice is desired because it allows individuals to exert control over their own outcomes (Lind & Tyler, 1988). On the other hand, procedural justice may be important to individuals because individuals desire “process control,” or the ability to influence the process of outcome attainment (Greenberg, 1990; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1987). Thus, explicit policies reaffirming that procedural and distributive justice are key elements of the organization's culture are likely to be perceived favorably by most individuals (Greenberg, 1990).

However, individual work values differ (e.g., Ravlin & Meglino, 1987), and individuals make value-laden job choices (Judge & Bretz, 1992; Vroom, 1966). Because “justice” is conceptually similar to “fairness,” and value intensity affects the amount or degree of something an individual wants (Locke, 1976), under the tenets of person-organization fit it is reasonable to expect that individuals who value fairness will prefer jobs in organizations which emphasize fairness because these individuals are highly concerned with the equity of outcomes and the means through which the outcomes are achieved. Therefore, we hypothesized that:

*H3: Individuals who are fairness value dominant will be more likely than other applicants to prefer jobs in organizations which express concern for: (1) procedural justice; and (2) distributive justice.*

Similarly, the confluence of demographic, legislative, and attitudinal changes suggest that work/family issues will be of central importance in the future. The collection of policies regarding how an organization deals with

work/family issues might reasonably be thought of as a HR system. Certain vacancy characteristics, such as positive work/family policies, differentiate organizations from one another, and are likely to be perceived as attractive by virtually all applicants (Rynes, 1992). Rynes (1992) argues that work/family policies may influence job choices and that:

provision of flextime or on-site day care—even at the employee's expense—might yield high returns in terms of attraction and retention, because such nonstandard benefits more clearly distinguish an employer from its competitors. Similarly, there are several benefits that might be used only by a subset of the employee populations (and hence be relatively inexpensive), but that might have substantial effects on an organization's image as a "good place to work" (e.g., educational benefits or sick child day care) (p. 433).

Moreover, differences in how organizations accommodate work/family issues are likely to differentially affect job seekers (Friedman & Galinsky, 1992). Individuals presumably differ in the degree to which work and family obligations create conflicts. For example, the strength of a person's work ethic (Weber, 1958) may influence the level of work/family conflict a person experiences. It also is true that career expectations are becoming less significant indicators of success in many individual's lives, and that many family-based influences are providing an increasing sense of fulfillment for many people (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Therefore, it may be reasonable to expect that organizations expressing strong concern for work/family balance will be generally desirable to job applicants. However, although expressed policies for balancing work and family issues may indicate that an organization is a good place to work (Rynes, 1992), it seems reasonable that these policies would be more important to applicants with higher levels of perceived work/family conflict, because they are more likely to have an immediate need for these accommodations and therefore should prefer organizations which offer them. Furthermore, those who do not presently experience work/family conflict but believe it will be an important issue for them in the future also should value work-family policies. Therefore, we hypothesized that:

**H4:** *Individuals experiencing higher levels of work/family conflict will be more likely than other applicants to prefer jobs in organizations that have expressed policies for accommodating work/family issues.*

## Methods

### *Setting, Subjects, and Procedure*

Surveys were administered to students in several upper-level human resources courses at two major U.S. universities in the Midwest and Northeast. The Northeast sample consisted of both undergraduate and graduate students, while the Midwest sample consisted only of graduate students. Participation

was voluntary and anonymity of responses was assured. Seventy-six students were eligible to participate and 65 surveys were returned, yielding a response rate of 86%. Age of the respondents ranged from 20 to 39 years, with the average age equal to 24.5 years ( $SD = 3.8$  years). Eighty-two percent of the respondents were white, and 66% were men. Previous job experience ranged from no prior experience to 21 years experience; the average respondent reported an average experience level of 2.4 years ( $SD = 3.8$  years). Fifteen percent of respondents were married. Of those who were married, 78% of their spouses worked outside the home (44% worked in professional positions). The average working spouse worked 35.5 hours per week ( $SD = 17.9$  hours). Thirteen percent of respondents were undergraduates, while 87% were graduate students. Thirty-one percent of the respondents attended the Midwest University while 69% attended the Northeast University. Grade point average (GPA) of respondents ranged from 2.4 to 4.0, with an average of 3.4 ( $SD = 0.35$ ). Fifty-two percent of the respondents were currently interviewing for jobs, with the rest of the students expected to interview within a year. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents perceived many employment opportunities, 51% perceived some alternatives, and 21% perceived few or no employment alternatives.

### *Research Design*

A mixed experimental design (Keppel, 1982) incorporating both within-subjects and between-subjects components was used. The within-subjects design permits inferences to be drawn about the relative importance of particular factors that individuals use to make decisions. This element of the design is referred to as policy capturing and has been used to study decision making processes in many organizational contexts, including job choice decisions (Arnold, 1981; Feldman & Arnold, 1978; Judge & Bretz, 1992; Rynes & Lawler, 1983; Rynes, Schwab & Heneman, 1983; Zedeck, 1977).

The within-subject factors used in the present study included those that have been shown by previous research to have the strongest effects on job preferences (salary level and promotional opportunities), and the HR systems hypothesized to affect job choices (reward systems, mobility systems, justice systems, and work-family systems). Because non-pecuniary aspects of job choice may be interpretable only when pecuniary attributes are accurately represented (Rynes et al., 1983), the manipulated values for pay and promotional opportunities were derived from placement office data and reflected realistic market conditions that the subjects would face in an actual job choice.

Two levels of reward systems were used. Individually-oriented reward systems were described as those in which "yearly salary increases are determined by your *individual* productivity." Alternatively, group-oriented reward systems were described as those in which "yearly salary increases are determined by your *work group's* productivity." Two levels of mobility systems were used. Contest mobility systems were described as those in which "all employees compete for promotions on the basis of their recent performance, regardless of their historical accomplishments." Alternatively, sponsored mobility systems were described as those in which "high potential employees are placed on the 'fast-

track' and have promotional opportunities that are generally unavailable to other employees." Two levels of justice system differences were used. One level described environments as procedurally ("employees are assured of fair treatment in all human resource procedures"), and distributively ("employees are assured that outcomes and rewards are distributed fairly") just. Alternatively, since it would be unreasonable to expect subjects to express interest in organizations that are overtly unfair, and it is unlikely that such information would be conveyed to job applicants, the other level of justice system was represented by making no reference to the justice component. Finally, two levels of work/family issues were used. The organization was either described as having "implemented policies that promote a balance between work and family life (e.g., day-care, parental leave, flexitime, etc.)" or no mention was made of work/family issues.

The six within-subjects independent variables were completely crossed so that the independent effects of each factor could be assessed. This resulted in 128 ( $2^7$ ) scenarios which contained all possible combinations of the independent variables. The order in which the factors appeared in the scenarios was randomized. An example of a scenario is provided below:

This organization has implemented policies that promote a balance between work and family life (e.g., day-care, parental leave, flexitime, etc.). The starting salary for this job is \$35,000. Employees are assured that outcomes and rewards are distributed fairly. By the fourth year, the average graduate has received 1 promotion. All employees compete for promotions on the basis of their recent performance, regardless of their historical accomplishments. Yearly salary increases are determined by your *individual* productivity.

The dependent variable was the probability of accepting a job offer with the above characteristics if such an offer were made. It was operationalized in this manner: "Indicate the extent to which you would likely accept an offer possessing the above characteristics." Subjects responded to a 7-point Likert scale anchored by 1 = highly unlikely to 7 = highly likely.

#### *Between-Subjects Measures*

Inter-individual differences based on individual attributes were assessed using the between-subjects part of the design. In order to control for possible consistency or priming effects, the survey order was mixed such that one-half of the subjects completed the between-subjects material first, and one-half of the subjects completed the within-subjects material first. Due to the length of the within-subjects part of the survey, it was necessary to keep the between-subjects portion as brief as possible. Therefore, the shortest possible measures were used that would still yield a valid measure of the constructs. Description of the between-subjects measures follows.

*Team orientation.* Preference for team-based reward contingencies was assessed with a two-item scale which consisted of the items: (1) Members of



a team should get the same rewards; and (2) If some team members contribute more, they should get more in return (reverse coded). Subjects responded by indicating that they thought the statement was either "true" or "false". The coefficient alpha estimate for this measure was .77.

*Locus of control.* Locus of control was measured using five items from Rotter's locus of control scale (Rotter, 1966). The items we used included: (1) Without the right breaks one cannot perform well on the job; (2) Many of the unhappy things in people's lives are partly due to bad luck; (3) In my case getting what I want has little to do with luck; (4) Who gets promoted often depends on who was lucky enough to be in the right place first; and (5) Most people don't realize the extent to which what happens on the job is controlled by accidental happenings. Coefficient alpha for the 5-item scale was .69.

*Work/family conflict.* Work/family conflict was measured using three items derived from existing work/family conflict scales (Frone, Russell & Cooper, 1992; Gutek, Searle & Klepa, 1991). These items included: (1) My working life does (or I think my working life will) interfere with my family life; (2) To "get ahead" I will have to neglect or postpone some family duties or obligations; and (3) A person must choose to emphasize either their work or their family life; you can't have it all. Subjects responded using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree). Coefficient alpha for the 3-item scale was .60.

*Fairness value dominance.* Work values were assessed by the Comparative Emphasis Scale (CES), a survey developed and tested by Ravlin and Meglino (1987), Meglino et al. (1989), and Ravlin and Meglino (1989). The values represented in the CES (fairness, honesty, achievement, and concern for others) were chosen from a set of many possible work values and appear to be the most salient and important values to many individuals. The CES presents 12 statements describing each of the four values. These 48 statements are divided into pairs such that a statement representing each of the four values is paired with each other value four times. For each pair, individuals are asked to check which value they feel should be emphasized most in their own behavior. Each of the four comparison replications was randomized in order and in the value that appeared first in each pair. The emphasis on what the individual should or ought to display is consistent with most conceptualizations of social values (Rokeach, 1973). The result yields a purely ipsative measure of values (i.e., which values are most important to each individual relative to other values they consider). Fairness value dominance was determined by the number of times an individual chose fairness over the other value in the pair. For example, an individual who chose fairness over the other values 11 times would have a greater fairness value dominance than someone who chose fairness over the other values 10 or fewer times.

*Other variables.* Questions concerning gender, race, age, marital status, spouse's employment status, number and age of dependents, university and degree program attended, grade-point average (GPA), number of years of work experience, perceived labor market alternatives (1 = no alternatives, 5 = many alternatives), and estimated time to beginning their job search (1 = currently

interviewing, 5 = will not interview for more than a year) were assessed from individual questions on the survey.

### Analyses

#### *Between-Subjects Analysis*

The effects of the within-subjects factors, the between-subjects factors, and the hypothesized interactions were examined using multiple regression analysis. Because the policy-capturing design does not generate independent observations with respect to the between-subjects variables, estimates are susceptible to autocorrelation. Thus, the regression parameters were estimated using generalized least squares (Hanushek & Jackson, 1977). To control for perceived differences in the attractiveness of the job offers associated with university attended or degree program, three dummy variables were computed from the combinations of degree program and university (Northeast graduates, Northeast undergraduates, Midwest graduates). Undergraduates served as the comparison group in the analysis. Perceived employment opportunities (1 = no perceived alternatives, 5 = many perceived alternatives), and estimated time from present that the respondent intended to begin his or her job search (1 = interviewing now, 5 = more than a year) also were used to control for the possibility that attractiveness of the offers was affected by perceived opportunity or salience of the exercise.

#### *Within-Subjects Analyses*

The effects of the independent variables on job choice decisions was assessed using multiple regression analysis. Orthogonal contrast coding was used (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). One regression equation was calculated for each subject. We also used a hierarchical clustering procedure to examine the degree to which HR systems are differentially important in job choice decisions to different types of individuals. Ward's (1963) procedure was used as the clustering method because research has suggested that Ward's procedure performs at least as well as any other clustering method (Milligan, 1980). The procedure used as input the standardized regression weights of the within-subjects factors for each of the 65 subjects. It then iteratively combined these weights and computed an error index based on the sum of the squared deviations between each beta weight for each pair of individuals, divided by the number of individuals in the group. The clusters consisted of those combinations of individuals who, when combined together, generated the lowest squared deviation (the least error). For example, the procedure began by forming 64 groups from the 65 subjects by combining the two individuals who generated the smallest squared deviation summed across their beta weights. The procedure continued until all individuals were combined into one group. The optimal number of clusters is suggested by the point in this process where the largest relative increase in the error index occurs.

## Results

### *Between-Subjects Results*

The correlations between variables used in the analyses are shown in Table 1. Because of the orthogonal nature of the within-subjects design, correlations involving the within-subjects factors are zero and are therefore not reported. Table 2 displays the regression results for the probability of accepting a job offer. As predicted by past research, pay level and promotional opportunities were among the most significant predictors of offer acceptance. This supports the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the HR system variables also generally operated as expected. Individually-oriented reward systems, contest mobility systems, and work/family policies all significantly affected the probability of job acceptance. Of the between-subjects variables, work/family conflict, team orientation, and internal locus of control significantly predicted job acceptance. With respect to the control variables, subjects who were currently interviewing were more likely to accept jobs than were those who would begin interviewing at a later date, undergraduates were more likely to accept jobs than were graduate students, those with less work experience were more likely to accept jobs than those with more experience, older subjects were more likely to accept jobs than were younger subjects, and women were more likely to accept jobs than were men. Finally, students from the Northeast university were more likely to accept jobs than were those from the Midwest university.

The interactional analyses provide support for hypotheses one through four. This suggests that the match between individual characteristics and HR system characteristics significantly affects job preferences. Specifically, the interaction of group-based reward systems with team orientation, the interaction of expressed concern for procedural and distributive justice with fairness value dominance, the interaction of work/family policies with perceived work/family conflict, and the interaction of contest mobility systems with internal locus of control all significantly predicted job offer acceptance. Plotting the regression results revealed that all hypothesized interactions were in the predicted direction.

### *Within-Subjects Results*

In order to examine the degree to which individuals varied in their job choice decisions, one regression equation was estimated for each subject. There was considerable variation in the degree to which the within-subjects factors predicted offer acceptance. For the 65 subjects,  $R^2$  varied between .22 and .97. The percentage of coefficients that were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) for the within-subjects factors were: distributive justice (22%), procedural justice (29%), mobility system (51%), promotional opportunities (63%), work/family policies (68%), pay level (78%), and reward system (83%). The absolute value of the coefficients' ranges were: distributive justice (.000 to .213), procedural justice (.000 to .217), mobility system (.010 to .788), promotional opportunities (.010 to .565), work/family policies (.006 to .890), pay level (.000 to .826), and

Table 1. Intercorrelation Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1 Age	—	91	05	-07	22	22	-01	34	-03	-09	10	15	-08	-02	06	05	05	-02	-11
2 Work Experience		—	-07	-14	22	34	09	15	-11	-12	11	09	-03	-02	06	03	03	-01	-10
3 Male			—	08	-07	-19	-03	10	-21	-17	-25	-13	-14	-03	-15	-04	-04	-03	-09
4 Grade Point Average				—	-33	-20	-33	36	-14	00	-14	22	-17	00	-09	07	07	-04	-02
5 Perceived Employment Opportunities					—	28	42	-25	08	11	-24	01	15	02	-14	00	00	-04	-09
6 Time Until Beginning Job Search						—	20	-01	01	-14	-06	-20	03	-03	-03	-06	-06	01	-14
7 Northeast University							—	-43	-06	06	03	-13	17	01	02	-04	-04	04	-09
8 Year In School								—	09	-19	15	30	01	-04	09	09	09	00	-09
9 Order of Manipulations									—	-11	19	-00	03	-02	11	-00	-00	01	03
10 Internal Locus of Control										—	18	-02	06	20	11	-01	-01	01	04
11 Team Orientation											—	17	12	04	60	05	05	03	08
12 Fairness Value Dominant												—	-04	-00	10	32	32	-01	05
13 Work/Family Conflict													—	01	07	-01	-01	24	08
14 Contest Mobility X Internal Locus of Control														—	02	-00	-00	00	00
15 Individual Rewards X Team Orientation															—	03	03	02	15
16 Distributive Justice X Fairness Value Dominance																—	10	-00	07
17 Procedural Justice X Fairness Value Dominance																	—	-00	07
18 Work/Family Policies X Work/Family Conflict																		—	—
19 Offer Acceptance																			—

Notes: N = 7808. Decimals are omitted.

**Table 2.** Regression Results for Predicting Job Choice (Generalized Least Squares)

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>SE</i>
<b>Within-Subjects Factors</b>		
Pay Level	.25**	.01
Promotional Opportunities	.17**	.01
Individually-Based Reward System	.28**	.01
Contest Mobility System	.08*	.05
Distributive Justice Policy	-.02	.03
Procedural Justice Policy	-.02	.03
Work/Family Policy	.11**	.04
<b>Between-Subjects Factors</b>		
Age	.11**	.03
Team Orientation	.12**	.02
Internal Locus of Control	-.06**	.02
Fairness Value Dominant	.01	.02
Perceived Work/Family Conflict	.08**	.01
Time Until Beginning Job Search	-.09**	.01
Perceived Employment Opportunities	-.01	.01
Work Experience	-.15**	.03
Grade Point Average	-.01	.01
Male	-.07**	.01
Year In School	-.21**	.02
Northeast University	-.16**	.01
Order of Manipulations	-.01	.01
<b>Fit Interactions</b>		
Group-Based Reward System X Team Orientation	.07**	.02
Contest Mobility System X Internal Locus of Control	.08*	.05
Procedural Justice Policies X Fairness Value Dominance	.08**	.03
Distributive Justice Policies X Fairness Value Dominance	.09**	.03
Work/Family Policies X Perceived Work/Family Conflict	.10**	.04
R <sup>2</sup>		.27

Notes:  $N = 7808$ . \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

reward system (.007 to .976). A table which contains the 65 individual within-subjects regression equations is available upon request from the authors.

### *Clustering Results*

The clustering procedure suggested that six clusters were optimal since combining from six to five clusters resulted in the largest percentage increase in the error coefficient. To interpret the clusters, regressions of the within-subjects factors on the likelihood of offer acceptance were calculated for each cluster. These results are presented in Table 3. Cluster 1 consisted of individuals who are individual incentive dominant. They preferred reward systems in which reward distribution decisions are based on individual effort and contribution. Cluster 2 consisted of individuals who are primarily concerned with pay level. They were much more likely to accept the job that offers the highest salary. Members of Cluster 2 also exhibited a moderate concern for individually-based

**Table 3.** Regressions of Within-Subject Factors on Offer Acceptance by Cluster

<i>Within-Subject Factor</i>	<i>Cluster</i>					
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
Distributive Justice	.06**	.05**	.04	.04	.06*	.07
Procedural Justice	.05**	.05*	.04	.06*	.09**	.00
Pay Level	.18**	.52**	.24**	.12**	.19**	.09
Promotional Opportunities	.15**	.26**	.07*	.20**	.20**	.13*
Individual Reward System	.49**	.26**	-.31**	-.02	.28**	.11*
Contest Mobility System	-.06**	-.03	.16**	-.03	.39**	-.53**
Work/Family Policies	.22**	.07*	.11**	.54**	.17**	.01
R	.60**	.65**	.45**	.59**	.59**	.57**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.36	.42	.20	.34	.34	.30
Number of Observations	3200	1664	1024	896	768	256
Number of Individuals	25	13	8	7	6	2

*Notes:* \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ . Estimates are standardized regression coefficients.

Clusters were labeled as follows:

Cluster 1 = Individual incentive dominant

Cluster 2 = Pay dominant promotion reward system moderate

Cluster 3 = Group incentive pay contest mobility moderate

Cluster 4 = Work/family dominant

Cluster 5 = Contest mobility individual incentive important

Cluster 6 = Sponsored mobility dominant

pay and sponsored mobility systems. Cluster 3 consisted of individuals who seem to prefer group-based reward distribution systems, although pay level and contest mobility systems also appeared to be important in their job choices. Cluster 4 consisted of individuals who were primarily concerned with work/family conflict and were more likely to accept jobs in organizations that have stated policies for balancing work and family issues. Cluster 5 consisted of individuals who preferred contest mobility systems and individually-based reward systems. Finally, Cluster 6 consisted of individuals who strongly preferred sponsored mobility systems.

Some significant differences were noted between the clusters (see Table 4). For example, individuals in Cluster 4 were significantly older than those in Cluster 2. Cluster 2 was primarily male while Cluster 1 was primarily female and Cluster 4 was entirely female. GPA was higher in Cluster 1 than in Clusters 2 and 3. Subjects in Cluster 3 were further away from beginning their actual interviewing activities than were members of the other clusters, and they perceived higher levels of perceived work/family conflict than were members of Clusters 1, 5, and 6. Finally, members of Cluster 4 expressed higher levels of team orientation than did members of Cluster 2.

### Discussion

This study suggests that HR system variables influence applicant decision processes. The findings are consistent with theories of vocational choice that are based on congruence between person and setting (Holland, 1966; Super, 1953), and decision theory that describes how complex decisions might be made

**Table 4.** Means of Between-Subjects Variables by Cluster

Variable	Cluster					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Team Orientation	0.72	0.46 <sup>d</sup>	0.75	1.29 <sup>b</sup>	1.00	1.00
Internal Locus of Control	22.52	20.69	21.75	20.71	21.33	21.50
Fairness Value Dominance	6.88	6.15	5.75	7.71	6.67	8.50
Perceived Work/Family Conflict	9.28 <sup>c</sup>	9.62	11.25 <sup>acf</sup>	10.43	8.50 <sup>c</sup>	7.50 <sup>c</sup>
Age	24.44	23.38 <sup>d</sup>	24.50	26.71 <sup>b</sup>	24.33	24.00
Male	0.28 <sup>b</sup>	0.62 <sup>ad</sup>	0.38	0.00 <sup>b</sup>	0.33	0.50
Grade Point Average	3.55 <sup>bc</sup>	3.29 <sup>a</sup>	3.30 <sup>a</sup>	3.41	3.32	3.60
Begin Job Search	2.48 <sup>bc</sup>	1.46 <sup>acc</sup>	4.13 <sup>abdf</sup>	1.71 <sup>c</sup>	2.83 <sup>d</sup>	2.00 <sup>c</sup>
Perceived Employment Opportunities	4.08	3.77	4.12	3.86	3.83	3.50
Work Experience	2.52	1.15	3.50	3.43	2.67	1.00
Number of Individuals	25	13	8	7	6	2

Note: <sup>a</sup> significant difference ( $p < .10$ ) from Cluster 1 (Individual incentive dominant)  
<sup>b</sup> significant difference ( $p < .10$ ) from Cluster 2 (Pay dominant promotion reward system moderate)  
<sup>c</sup> significant difference ( $p < .10$ ) from Cluster 3 (Group incentive pay contest mobility moderate)  
<sup>d</sup> significant difference ( $p < .10$ ) from Cluster 4 (Work/family dominant)  
<sup>e</sup> significant difference ( $p < .10$ ) from Cluster 5 (Contest mobility individual incentive important)  
<sup>f</sup> significant difference ( $p < .10$ ) from Cluster 6 (Sponsored mobility dominant)

(Payne, 1976; Soelberg, 1967). Consistent with previous research, pay level and promotional opportunities were significant predictors of job choice. Additionally, three of the four HR systems included in this study exhibited significant main effects on job choices. For over a decade these types of practices have been hypothesized to affect job applicants' perceptions by sending signals about the nature of the organization (Rynes, 1992; Rynes, Heneman & Schwab, 1980). These results provide preliminary evidence that an organization's HR practices do, in fact, convey information that affects decision making processes.

The reward system effects suggest that, in general, individuals prefer to work in environments in which their individual efforts and contributions are recognized. This result has indirect implications in light of the increasing use of team-based work design, team-based employee involvement programs, and predictions that teams will be the primary unit of production in the future (Magjuka & Baldwin, 1991; Manz & Sims, 1987). If the general purpose of such programs is to improve the organization's competitive stature, and the availability of talent in the labor pool is becoming increasingly scarce, these practices may be self-defeating because they are considered by many applicants to be undesirable vacancy characteristics (Rynes & Barber, 1990). On the other hand, since team-based production does not necessitate team-based reward, the direct implications of our results for organizations using or contemplating team-based work environments with individual reward systems are less clear.

The mobility system effects suggest that job applicants generally find contest mobility systems preferable to sponsored mobility systems. This is again indicative of an individual approach to work (Rosenbaum, 1984), and supports the veracity of the quintessential "American dream" in which individualism is predominant and a person's upward mobility and success are limited only by

ones' own ability and motivation. It may also be a sign of the uncertainty associated with the job choice process. Under the constrained and stressful parameters that accompany most job choice decision, individuals may be less willing to accept sponsored mobility systems that might actually work to their advantage because they do not have the information necessary to determine if, in fact, they would be part of the sponsored group. Given what we know about decision making, which is often risk-averse in nature (Bazerman, 1990), in the absence of assurances that one *will be* sponsored, it may be rational to prefer situations in which *nobody* will be sponsored. It also is possible that the sponsored mobility manipulation was viewed as so exclusionary that most subjects believed it to be *unlikely* that they would qualify and therefore found it to be undesirable. If the latter explanation is true, the results may be somewhat method bound. Finally, because this was a student sample, it is possible that the individualistic nature of collegiate environments (both in terms of contribution and recognition) might be at least partially responsible for contest mobility preferences. If this is true, these preferences might fade over time as employees become more removed from the individualistic, competitive university environment.

Support for the four interaction hypotheses suggests that HR system characteristics may be most influential in job choices when considered in the context of person-organization fit. Specifically, even though particular types of reward, mobility, and work/family systems were generally preferred, the significant coefficients on the interactions indicated that particular types of individuals prefer particular HR systems and that these preferences affect job choices. The person-organization fit literature is predicated on the assumption that individual and organizational characteristics interact such that a person fits some environments and does not fit others. While most of this literature has studied fit in post-hire contexts, the current results support the handful of studies that have suggested that perceptions of person-organization fit are important in pre-hire decisions (Bretz et al., 1989; Judge & Bretz, 1992; Rynes et al., 1991). Documentation of fit at the pre-hire stage is important because many of the dimensions upon which fit is presumed to be based (particularly values such as achievement and fairness) are relatively stable and unlikely to be changed by organizational socialization practices (Ravlin & Meglino, 1989).

Schneider (1987) hypothesized that organizations develop attraction-selection-attrition (A-S-A) cycles that limit the diversity of organizational members and eventually compromise an organization's ability to react to externalities. From this perspective, documentation of pre-hire fit-based decision making also may be important. That is, homogenization beginning early in the A-S-A cycle is more likely to create the critical mass that is considered dysfunctional. Therefore, knowing that particular types of applicants do indeed find particular organizations more attractive supports Schneider's concerns about the archetypical "right-type." It seems that the homogenization process begins prior to organizational entry, and therefore increases the probability of achieving the critical mass. Whether or not this leads to diminished organizational performance remains an empirical question.



The cluster analysis identified six groups who differed with regard to the importance of various factors in their job choice decisions, and with regard to several between-subjects variables. For example, Cluster 2 was considered to be pay *level* dominant, but Clusters 1 and 3 were clearly pay *system* dominant. Cluster 1 consisted of individuals who preferred individually-based rewards while Cluster 3 contained individuals who preferred group-based rewards. Cluster 4 consisted of individuals for whom work/family issues were of central importance. Individuals in Cluster 5 could be characterized as "rugged individualists" due to their preference for individual rewards and contest mobility systems. Conversely, individuals in Cluster 6 placed a high level of importance on sponsored mobility systems. Analysis of the between-subjects variables revealed that Cluster 2 (pay level dominant) contained significantly higher percentage of males than did Clusters 1 and 3. They also tended to have lower GPAs than did those in Cluster 1, and began their job searches much earlier than did members of Clusters 1 and 3. On the other hand, Cluster 4 (work/family dominant) contained *no males*, was significantly older, and possessed higher levels of team orientation than did Cluster 2. These results are consistent with prior research suggesting that individuals who place a high value on pay level (Cluster 2), also may display characteristics that many organizations will find undesirable (e.g., Lawler, 1971). However, while Cluster 4 afforded greatest weight to work/family policies, Cluster 3 contained members with the greatest level of perceived work/family conflict. Their preference for group-based reward systems may indicate a belief that group settings offer greater flexibility than is typically available in individual contributor roles. Although system variables were generally considered important by members of our sample, the cluster results indicated that particular system variables are more important than others to particular people, and that these preferences may be predictable. However, more research, with larger and more diverse samples, is needed to further consider how different HR systems affect different groups of potential job applicants.

### *Limitations*

There are some shortcomings with this study that should be acknowledged. First, even though we drew samples from two university settings, the sample still consisted of students and is subject to questions of generalizability. However, use of student subjects in this context is appropriate because most of these students were actually seeking jobs at the time of the study, and thus were acting in role (Sackett & Larson, 1991). Thus, student job seekers are as relevant for the research questions addressed in this study as any other sample of job seekers. Nevertheless, it is possible that different results would have been obtained for other types of positions and future research should consider the effects of system information on other samples of job seekers.

The length of the survey also limited the quality of individual information which we collected. For example, the measures of locus of control and perceived work/family conflict were abbreviated versions of more complete scales. The attenuated, though acceptable, internal consistency coefficients we observed

likely understated the interaction effects between individual and system characteristics because scale reliability limits the explanatory power of the scales. Future studies should consider focusing more intensively on particular HR systems, and more precise measurement of individual differences.

Another limitation is that the manner in which some of the HR systems were operationalized may have affected the results. For example, even though previous research has shown fairness and justice to be important, they had weak main effects in this study. Because one can never be "assured" of fair treatment or fair outcomes, subjects may not have believed the justice manipulation or may have perceived it as unrealistic. It might also have been better to directly assess importance of family issues rather than anticipated work-family conflict. As operationalized, the work-family issue probably captures the importance of family issues and confounds it with expectations of how accommodating an employer *might* or *might not* be.

Finally, because of the policy-capturing design used, subjects were asked to make job choice decisions in a contrived setting rather than in the actual context in which such decisions are made. Thus, a limitation in our study is that the degree to which these results generalize to actual job choices is unknown. However, policy-capturing designs allow for a high level of experimental control and also offer the advantages of minimizing priming effects and social desirability bias (Schwab, Rynes & Aldag, 1987). Considerable care was taken to ensure that the sample consisted of actual job seekers and that the manipulations of the job and organization characteristics were realistic. Furthermore, the results are generally consistent with the expectations deduced from the literature. Therefore, generalizations to the "real-life" setting are appropriate (Mook, 1983).

#### *Implications for Practice and Future Research*

Several implications for practice follow from the results. Because HR system information does seem to affect at least hypothetical job choices, organizations may wish to carefully consider the messages HR system differences convey. Practices that are generally considered to have positive main effects (like progressive work/family policies) should be publicized. Likewise, if an organization wishes to attract a particular type of individual, vacancy characteristics that appeal to that type of person should be emphasized in the recruiting process. Moreover, the effects of pre-hire perceptions of fit appear to be consistent with post-hire effects. That is, vacancy characteristics that lead to pre-hire perceptions of fit appear to be similar to job characteristics that effect post-hire perceptions of fit and subsequent employee retention. Therefore, organizations should consider altering vacancy characteristics that are considered incongruent with important employee/applicant attributes, since doing so should improve the ability to attract and retain employees with the desired characteristics.

For example, consider the prototypical high-technology organization. These types of organizations generally emphasize cooperative interdependent behavior, and rely on organizationally-oriented reward systems (Bretz &

Dreher, 1990). In stark contrast, research scientists and engineers are characterized by high needs for autonomy and achievement and therefore tend to prefer individually-oriented systems (Jackson, 1984). Therefore, in this situation, the information conveyed in the organization's HR systems may indicate an environment which is incongruent with the internal need states of a critical class of employees. As such, engineers and scientists with alternatives may self-select out of contention for jobs in the high-technology sector. In a similar vein, organizations should consider how the message being sent via HR system characteristics affects the applicants they are trying to attract.

Finally, this study also raises some additional questions that need to be considered. While the results of the present study suggest that HR system information affects job choice decisions when this information is presented to individuals, very little is known about how individuals collect this information. Future research should examine whether applicants actively seek out this type of information, and if so which individual characteristics differentiate those who do. In addition, because the methods and sources applicants use likely affect information quality, further examination along these lines also may prove to be useful avenues for future research. That is, which sources convey what type of system information, and how do source characteristics affect the believability of the information? Organizations may also directly present system information to job seekers. Future research should examine the organizational conditions under which this is likely to happen, and those under which it is most beneficial.

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