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A proposed study of verbal employment references.

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UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE

A Proposed study of
VERBAL EMPLOYMENT REFERENCES

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty
Of the Graduate School of the University of Louisville
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Of Master of Arts

Department of Psychology

By

(Name) Bernard M. Smith

1949

NAME OF STUDENT Bernard M. Smith

TITLE OF THESIS Verbal Employment

References

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I. INTRODUCTION

During the writer's experience with various employment procedures, an interesting phenomena was noted. Routine letters of reference investigation disclosed very few negative or unfavorable statements about prospective applicants. Obviously, the favorable information was important but also the unfavorable remarks were of equal importance.

In noting this peculiarity of selection programs in general, the writer decided to investigate his experience for possible data. A search was made of the writer's company and results were interesting. Two hundred seventy-three persons were contacted requesting information about 55 applicants. Two

hundred letters were returned and in the entire sample of letters, the writer failed to find a single negative statement.

This data brought into focus the question as to generality of this phenomena in selection programs. An informal interview was conducted with seven personnel managers in Louisville and their experience indicated a similar situation. Three of those interviewed were securing a greater frequency of unfavorable or negative statements by using an informal telephone interview. This corresponded with the writers experience as he had tried 20 calls using a standard form and received eight negative statements.

(5)

Charles Brooks stated in his experience that "...the letter replies were almost always favorable and the telephone inquiry would rather give unfavorable information on the telephone..."

The implications of the preliminary investigation of the problem are:

- A. That references of applicants for employment are reluctant to express unfavorable statements about the applicant when a signature is required.

(2)

B. That the references appear not to express the same caution over unfavorable statements with a verbal telephone opportunity.

This paper will attempt to prepare a research design to investigate the possibility of a method for securing an adequate and reliable proportion of valid negative statements about applicants for employment for evaluation in a selection program.

II. DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESIS

What were some of the factors behind this preliminary difference?

1. Higher percentage of answers was possible with little inconvenience to the referent.
2. Better rapport could be established by voice. (5)
3. The necessity of signature was removed.
4. Wider area of choice was possible on fewer traits.

HYPOTHESIS: REFERENTS OF APPLICANTS FOR EMPLOYMENT FOR SECRETARY WILL GIVE SIGNIFICANTLY MORE NEGATIVE STATEMENTS ABOUT THE APPLICANT WHEN GIVEN A VERBAL OPPORTUNITY.

DEFINITIONS:

Referents: are those individual, either job or personal, references listed in the biography data sheet of the applicant.

Applicants: are white females applying for positions of Secretary in Company A of this study.

Employment: the usual routine of applying for a position in Company A as outlined in the introduction.

Secretary: a clerical position in Company A which involves typing, dictation, filing and reception of visitors.

Significant: the statistical significance at .01 level, as computed by the Chi-Squared formula.

Negative: the unfavorable statements about the applicant in relation to three traits selected.

Verbal opportunity: telephone contacts as defined in this study.

III. ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING HYPOTHESIS

The following are the primary assumptions underlying the hypothesis for the purposes of this paper:

1. Telephone conversation provides a relatively threat-free verbal opportunity to the referent contacted.
2. Taking the statistical results, if at a .01 per cent level, is significant, we can display relatively high confidence in the acceptance of a noted difference.

IV. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The basic observations for the experiment have been made. Now the remaining factor, the manipulation of one area under controls for checking of the hypothesis. This factor is the measurement of the number or weight of negative statements given by referents by letter as compared to number of negative statements or weights given by referents by telephone calls.

A. Controls

Several controls remained to make the experiment of value. The controls are as follows:

1. To use the first 50 female applicants for the position of secretary in Company A

who can satisfy the following criteria:

Give six references with telephone numbers, three of job experience and three of personal references and live in Louisville.

2. The referents for each applicant will be divided into three groups by a table of random numbers. The standard questionnaire is to be mailed on Tuesday before noon to group one. This was necessary to attempt to control other factors of business routine that may prevent careful attention by referent to the questionnaire. (Aurner, "Business Correspondence," P.597)
The group two and three referents will be called by telephone beginning at 10:00 A.M. Wednesday and the call should have been complete before 4:00 P. M. that day.
3. The questionnaire was constructed and weighted values given by the use of a modification of the Thurstone method for scaling of attitudes. ⁽¹⁰⁾
Twenty judges were presented a group of 15 questions on the three traits to be used. The judges rated those 15 statements on a 11 point scale from highly negative at 11 points to highly favorable at 1 point. The questions were totaled and the mean was selected as the

weight factor. The 15 questions were cut down to five questions for each of the three traits by selecting the highest negative mean and the lowest favorable mean, then selecting three questions that tended to fall near 6 points, 3.5 points and 8.5 points. In areas where scores were the same, we used the questions having the least deviation from the mean desired. Thus we have a weighted scale of five questions on a continuum from favorable to negative statements about the three traits we desired to sample.

4. The difficult area of controls seemed to be in the presentation of the standard questionnaire over the telephone exactly as written and without any bias of the referent. We will control this by making a wire recording of the presentation of the questionnaire. The referents' answers will not be included to avoid Federal law violations. Group three will be conducted identically to group two except referent will be informed that his conversation is being recorded. Then a group of three judges will be selected to review the recordings and determine if the sample was biased by the presentation. If two of the three voted that a biased was present, the applicant's case is disqualified.

B. Construction of the questionnaire

The traits selected for the study of secretary applicants were appearance, initiative and ability to deal with people. The basis for our selection of the three traits above were as follows:

1. That they were important to the position of secretary.
2. That they are easily observed by both personal and job referents.
3. That they are easily definable by the average referent.

In addition, Wagner⁽²⁵⁾ of American Institute for Research, found in his study that these traits were used more frequently by the writers in his survey. Their use, in some cases, twice to three times as often, appears to indicate their relative importance in any interview procedure. It is sufficient for our purpose, since we are only testing the incidence of negative statements between two methods of reference data collection, if we determine that they are important to the position and used generally.

A total of 15 statements were prepared in reference to each trait. These 15 statements were typed on 3 X 5 cards and the cards placed in random sequence. The random sequence was numbered on the back of the card and presented in that order to each judge. The trait cards were presented in the order of appearance, initiative, and ability to deal with people to each judge. Each judge had the following explanation given before he began ratings: "I will give you 45 cards presented in three groups. These cards are statements pertaining to the particular traits of appearance, initiative and ability to deal with others. I am making up a group of opinion questions and I want your reaction to them. Read the question carefully and then decide whether it is a positive or negative statement about the trait. Then tell me how you would rate it from positive or negative statement about the trait. Then tell me how you would rate it from positive to negative on a 11 point scale. One point is a positive or highly favorable. Six points would be average. Eleven points would be negative or unfavorable." We were careful in the procedure to evade any explanation of any particular question that might biased the

results. The 15 statements of each trait were cut down to five each according to a continuum of mean scores from negative to positive. The questionnaire was organized in random order by a table of random numbers. An explanation was given to establish rapport and aid in orientation of the referent. The questionnaire is enclosed in Figure 1. The weighted scores were added in red ink for presentation in Figure 1 but were not written on actual questionnaires.

C. Upon receipt of the letter references and the call completions, we prepared the statistical analysis as follows:

1. Total frequency for each method.
2. Apply Chi Squared test of independence for significance at .01 percent level.

Mr. John Doe
1010 Broadway
Louisville, Kentucky

Dear Mr. Doe

Miss Mary Smith has placed her application with our firm for the position of secretary. She states that you were her employer or an acquaintance and that you have knowledge of her characteristics. Please indicate statements below you feel describe her in relation to the three traits, appearance, initiative and ability to deal with people. Answer only the statements you feel apply best in her case.

-
-
- | | |
|--|------|
| <u>She doesn't take readily to strangers.</u> | 8.4 |
| <u>She tries to outdress others.</u> | 8.0 |
| <u>She meets people easily and wins their confidence by her friendly, cordial manner.</u> | 1.0 |
| <u>She finds things that need doing and goes ahead with them without instruction.</u> | 1.2 |
| <u>I liked her appearance, neither shabby nor outstanding.</u> | 4.2 |
| <u>She just doesn't grasp the job and go ahead.</u> | 9.9 |
| <u>She has a pleasant smile, but doesn't indicate more than a casual interest in being friendly.</u> | 5.2 |
| <u>She seems to have the knack of knowing the right things to wear.</u> | 1.4 |
| <u>You can depend upon her to do well what you have explained beforehand.</u> | 4.0 |
| <u>She is self conscious and nervous when greeting people.</u> | 9.7 |
| <u>Clothes appropriate, but hair-do not well kept.</u> | 6.2 |
| <u>You have to give her frequent encouragement.</u> | 8.2 |
| <u>She likes people but holds back until she becomes more acquainted.</u> | 4.0 |
| <u>She is active and alert but self conscious about her abilities.</u> | 5.7 |
| <u>Makes a poor impression, slovenly, unkempt or flashy.</u> | 10.9 |
-
-

Related to applicant _____

Dates of acquaintance _____ to _____

Signature _____

V. IMPLICATIONS

If the negative statements are not significantly greater between the two methods of contact of referents, then we must conclude:

1. The experiment was not valid.
2. That checking of references for employment appear from this evidence to be a very unsatisfactory selective instrument.
3. More research of reference checking techniques is indicated.

If the negative statements are significantly greater in the telephone contacts, then we have what promises to be a selective instrument for employment that has power to secure information from past actions. The study gives foundation for organization of each position of your company for telephone reference checking.

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