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Author(s): Rachel S. Shinnar, Cheri A. Young and Marta Meana

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# THE MOTIVATIONS FOR AND OUTCOMES OF EMPLOYEE REFERRALS

Rachel S. Shinnar  
Cheri A. Young  
Marta Meana  
*University of Nevada*

**ABSTRACT:** Research on employee referrals demonstrates positive outcomes for the recruited individual and the organization. However, little research addressed employees who make employment referrals, also known as employee recommenders. To address this gap in knowledge, we developed a conceptual model and present the theoretical basis for addressing the motivation of, and organizational outcomes associated with, employees who make employment recommendations. The model is based on the theories of word-of-mouth communication, cognitive dissonance, self-perception, and attitude change through self-persuasion. Partial support for the model was found in an experimental design simulating an employee referral situation. Results showed an increase in normative commitment of recommenders.

**KEY WORDS:** employee referrals; self-persuasion; word-of-mouth communication; attitudinal advocacy.

## INTRODUCTION

The practice of organizations encouraging their employees to refer friends and relatives to apply for open positions has become quite common, most likely because employee referrals are cost-effective (Morehart, 2001) and provide significant positive outcomes for the recruited individual and the organization. For example, compared to employees recruited through formal sources, employees recruited through referrals were found to have longer tenure (Breaugh, 1981; Kirnan, Farley, & Geisinger, 1989), better performance (Kirnan et al., 1989), higher levels of job satisfaction (Breaugh, 1992), and more pre-hire knowledge

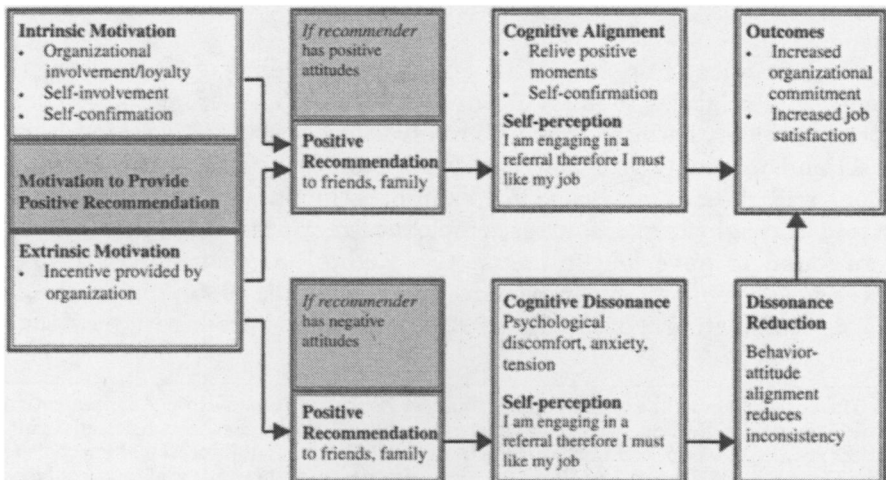
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(Williams, Labig, & Stone, 1993) which may facilitate socialization. The link between informal recruiting sources such as employee referrals and positive post-hire outcomes is thought to come from: (a) the realistic job previews (Breaugh & Starke, 2000) given by employees to individuals they are referring for employment, and (b) the job-relevant individual differences in applicant populations produced by employee referrals (Williams et al., 1993). While research has frequently examined the impact of employee referrals on the referred employee and the organization, little if any research has addressed employees who make employment recommendations, also known as employee recommenders.

To address this gap in knowledge, we developed the Employee Recommenders' Motivation and Outcomes (ERMO) model (see Figure 1), and present the theoretical basis for addressing the motivation of, and organizational outcomes associated with, employees who make employment recommendations to friends and relatives. While the positive effect of employee referrals on the referred employees is significant, we believe that the referral process positively influences employee recommenders as well. Our argument is depicted in the ERMO model, theoretically grounded in Dichter's (1966) work on word-of-mouth communication and the psychological theories of attitudinal advocacy (Chaiken, Wood, & Eagly, 1996). Attitudinal advocacy, also known as self-persuasion, consists of a set of theories (e.g., cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957); self-perception theory (Bem, 1972)) that "explain how individuals can be persuaded by their own arguments and actions" (Burgess, Haney, Snyder, Sullivan, & Transue 2000, p. 32). The ERMO model predicts that

**Figure 1**  
**Employee Recommenders' Motivation and Outcomes Model (ERMO Model)**



employee recommenders may have different motivations for, but will experience increased organizational normative commitment and job satisfaction from, having referred others to their organizations. We conclude by presenting the results of an experiment designed to test the ERMO model and make some recommendations for future research.

## WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION

Employee referrals are a form of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, which is defined as "informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization, or a service" (Harrison-Walker, 2001, p. 63). The antecedents to WOM communication can be either intrinsic or extrinsic. In the context of employee referrals, individuals who have positive job attitudes are likely to engage in WOM behavior based on intrinsic motivation. However, the ERMO model also predicts the outcomes for employee recommenders who do not have positive work attitudes, but engage in positive WOM as a result of extrinsic rewards offered by the organization for referrals (such as monetary inducements).

Intrinsic motivation is defined as behaviors "that is performed for its own sake rather than for the purpose of acquiring material or social rewards" (Pinder, 1998, p. 165). Therefore, employees who feel positively about their employers may be intrinsically motivated to make referrals because of: (1) self-involvement (to relive the delight of joining or to confirm their joy in being part of the organization); (2) self-confirmation (to reinforce their conviction that they made the right choice in working for the employer); or (3) other involvement (the desire to help or to share the benefits of joining the organization with others). Dichter (1966) explains that product or service recommendations serve as a means for channeling self-involvement and enhancing self-confirmation. As was stated by one of the subjects in his study: "I feel rather good that something I recommended was so well liked because it makes me feel that my judgement is good and...that people respect my judgement" (p. 150). Engaging in WOM then, reinforces the individuals' conviction of having made a valuable choice or decision.

Dichter (1966) also found that individuals engage in WOM in an attempt to eliminate post-decision dissonance (i.e., self-confirmation). Lindberg-Repo (1999) exposed a similar phenomenon in her research of upscale resort vacation guests. This researcher found that loyal customers on their third or more visit, engaged in WOM communication to friends, relatives, and co-workers in a significantly different way from first time customers. They offered explanations why the upscale price was justified,

thus using WOM communication as a way to reduce their price-related cognitive dissonance and to justify their repeated visits to the resort, a behavior that was not observed among first time visitors. "Loyal customers had strong 'advocacy bonds' which described their willingness to recommend and invite friends and colleagues to join them [the] next time" (p. 122). The loyal customers repeatedly conveyed a sense of ownership over a brand experience when engaging in WOM communication. We believe that a similar process occurs when individuals engage in employment referrals, identified as a form of WOM, namely, employees use the referral conversation as a way to justify their choice of employer.

### ATTITUDINAL ADVOCACY

Eagly and Chaiken (1993) define an attitude as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (p. 1). They further add that "attitudes are formed through cognitive, affective and behavioral processes" (p. 14). The cognitive aspect of attitudinal advocacy explains the process of self-persuasion through a person's stated arguments or actions. Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory and Bem's (1972) self-perception theory explain how stated arguments or actions influence attitude formation or change. Cognitive dissonance theory is based on the principle that people seek to maintain consistency, or *fit*, between the affective, cognitive, and behavioral processes of an attitude. Individuals experience cognitive dissonance when they hold beliefs that are inconsistent—in dissonance—with another belief or behavior (Festinger, 1957). In an experiment, Festinger (1957) showed that individuals who were required to publicly advocate a statement opposed to their personal convictions (i.e., engaging in attitude-discrepant behavior) experienced cognitive dissonance. Essentially, the individuals found themselves behaving in a manner which was conflictive with their beliefs and which resulted in cognitive dissonance. This dissonance triggered the need for dissonance reduction, which led the individual to alter his or her beliefs and/or attitudes to align them with the behavior in order to achieve consistency within him or herself.

Bem's (1972) self-perception theory adds that individuals infer their attitudes from observing their own behaviors, without the intervening effect of dissonance. Individuals observe their own behavior and infer their attitudes from it, similarly to how an outside observer would. Therefore, individuals' attitudes change because they use their behavior to infer their current attitudes, whether they engage in attitude-discrepant (counter-attitudinal) or attitude-congruent (pro-attitudinal) behavior. Bem's (1972) truth-light/lie-light experiments clarify this concept. In these experiments, subjects were asked to rate cartoons (which

they had previously rated as neutral) as 'very funny' or 'very unfunny'. They were required to indicate their reaction to each cartoon by either pressing a button (active behavior) or not doing so (non-behavior), to indicate the opposite response (Eagly, & Chaiken, 1993). Final ratings of cartoon funniness were more influenced by active behavioral responses than by non-responses, "even though logically the behaviors and non-behaviors were equally informative" (p. 547).

While social psychologists vary in which theory of attitude change they endorse, Fazio, Zanna and Cooper (1977) see them as complimentary because both theories advance our understanding of justifications for the effects of attitude discrepant behavior. Cognitive dissonance theory explains attitude-discrepant behavior while self-perception theory explains both attitude-congruent and attitude-discrepant behavior. We can therefore state that attitudinal advocacy theories predict that employees who 'sell' their organizations to friends or relatives will align their beliefs with the positive statements they make. Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance provides support for situations of attitude-discrepant behavior: when an employee who has negative job attitudes engages in positive WOM behavior for a referral (as a result of a monetary incentive), he or she experiences a state of cognitive dissonance. This will then, through the need for dissonance reduction, lead the employee to adjust his or her attitudes. By adjusting or aligning the attitude to fit the behavior (acting as though he or she has positive work attitudes), the individual will feel a higher level of organizational commitment and job satisfaction.

Bem's (1972) self-perception theory, on the other hand, provides the reasoning for both attitude-congruent and attitude-discrepant behavior. When an employee who holds positive work attitudes engages in positive WOM communication for a referral, his or her positive attitude towards the organization is heightened. However, when employees who have negative work attitudes are extrinsically motivated to engage in positive WOM communication, they will infer positive attitudes about their organizations from the recent WOM behavior. Therefore, employees who hold negative or neutral work attitudes, yet are enticed by organizational incentives for making referrals, are likely to infer that their employers must not be so bad after all, based on their behavior, because they are behaving as if they feel positively about their employers.

## SELF PERSUASION AND ATTITUDE FORMATION

The above-mentioned theories of cognitive dissonance and self-perception, in the context of employee referrals, are closely related to self-persuasion and its effect on attitude formation. As mentioned earlier, attitudes can be formed "on the basis of beliefs (cognitions), affect, (i.e.,



feelings, moods and emotions), behaviors (actions), or some combination of beliefs, affect and behaviors" (Kardes, 1999, p. 105). This process of attitude formation applies to the formation of work attitudes as well. In the context of employee referrals, we are examining the effect one's behavior (the behavior of engaging in a referral) has on one's job attitudes. Employee referrals can change the recommender's attitudes through self-persuasion because, while making a referral, the recommender engages in a personal conversation with a friend or relative regarding his or her organization, explaining why his or her employer offers a quality work place. When advocating a certain position, people usually focus on supportive information and neglect less supportive information (Kardes, 1999). Such active presentation of information has longer lasting effects on memory and attitude persistence than say, passively listening to someone else speaking about his or her job (Kardes, 1999). Therefore, we believe that the attitude change resulting from referral-related self-persuasion will be relatively long lasting because of the cognitive processing that takes place.

The question remains regarding how job attitudes can be measured or operationalized. Pinder (1998) identifies job satisfaction and organizational commitment as the two most widely studied constructs of job-related attitudes. Therefore, we have chosen to measure job attitudes as job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Organizational commitment is defined as "an individual's psychological attachment to the organization" (Caldwell, Chatman, & O'Reilley, 1990, p. 247) which encompasses both instrumental and normative commitment. Instrumental commitment is based on rewards that can be gained from organizational affiliation (such as pay, benefits, etc) while normative commitment is based on shared values and is more affective in nature (Caldwell et al., 1990). In this study we focus on the change in normative commitment only, because there were no rewards associated with making the referral in the experimental simulation. The experiment was designed to test the influence of the oral persuasion on the affective attitude towards one's organization. Based on the above stated arguments the following hypotheses were formulated:

## HYPOTHESES

- H1a:* Engaging in an employment recommendation will lead to an increase in normative commitment for the recommender immediately after engaging in a referral.
- H1b:* Engaging in an employment recommendation will lead to an increase in normative commitment for the recommender,

which will remain evident a week after the referral has been done.

- H2a:* Engaging in an employment recommendation will lead to an increase in job satisfaction for the recommender, immediately after engaging in a referral.
- H2b:* Engaging in an employment recommendation will lead to an increase in job satisfaction for the recommender, which will remain evident a week after the referral has been done.

## METHODOLOGY

An experiment was designed to test whether making a referral increases one's positive job attitudes (operationalized here as normative commitment and job satisfaction). Subjects were students taking classes during the 2002 summer semester at a large urban university's hotel administration college, and working 20 h a week or more. They were told they would be participating in an oral communication and persuasion study and were paid \$10 for their time, upon completion of all parts of the study.

### *Sample*

A total of 89 students agreed to participate in the study, 81 of which completed all three parts of the experiment. We further excluded all subjects who worked fewer than 20 h a week. This yielded a final sample of 75. The sample was 39% female and 61% male, average age was 25.4 years (*SD* 6.3), 17.3% were international students, 88% were full time students and 59% were working full time. In terms of employment, 36% worked in hotel operations related areas (such as front desk), 40% in food and beverage, 12% in other hospitality industry jobs (such as entertainment or meetings and conventions) and 12% in non-hospitality jobs. Most (85%) respondents were line employees; only 15% had supervisory or managerial positions. Average tenure was 1.4 years (*SD* 1.6), average number of hours worked each week was 33 (*SD* 8.9) (ranging from 20 to 50 h), and average yearly income was \$20, 629 (*SD* \$11, 617) excluding one respondent who was an unpaid intern.

The appropriate sample size for a three measure comparison (the pre-test, immediate post-test and delayed post-test) when expecting a medium size effect with  $\alpha$  at .05, was determined to be 64 subjects (Cohen, 1992). The final sample size of 75 was therefore deemed appropriate. Given the hypothetical nature of the intervention we did not expect a large effect size and computed our sample size based on a medium effect.



### *Measures*

The experiment consisted of four parts: a pre-test, a treatment, an immediate post-test, and a delayed post-test which was administered 7 days later. The pre-test included the short form of the Crowne and Marlowe (1960) Social Desirability Scale which measures a need for social approval. This scale contains 20 items (compared to the 33-item original) and has been tested for reliability in a number of studies yielding alpha coefficients between .71 and .79 (e.g., Ballard, 1992; Fisher, & Katz, 2000; Greenwald, & Satow, 1970; Reynolds, 1982; Strahan, & Gerbasi, 1972). In addition, Crowne and Marlow (1964) reported a test-retest correlation of .88.

The decision to control for social desirability is based on previous research, which has shown that social desirability is positively correlated with measures of organizational commitment and job satisfaction. "These variables were shown ... to be somewhat more susceptible to socially desirable responding than other commonly used measures" (Moorman & Podsakoff, 1992). Social desirability can introduce bias because respondents wish to be perceived in a positive way. Bias may stem from conscious impression management by the respondent, or by unconscious self-deception both of which may contaminate responding (Moorman, & Podsakoff, 1992). In Moorman and Podsakoff's (1992) study, social desirability showed small, yet significant correlations with job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

The pre-test also included Caldwell et al.'s (1990) 12-item organizational commitment scale and a one item measure for overall job satisfaction. As suggested by Nagy (2002), a one-item measure of overall job satisfaction is preferred to a multi-item scale. The organizational commitment and the job satisfaction items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). While the Caldwell et al., (1990) scale measures both normative and instrumental commitment, as mentioned earlier, in this study only the 8 items measuring normative commitment were used. This scale has been shown to have high internal reliability for the normative dimension (Vandenberg, Self, & Seo, 1994). Subjects were also asked to provide some demographic information while they were completing the pre-test including age, gender, job title, yearly income, etc.

### *Treatment*

The treatment consisted of asking subjects to refer a confederate to their organization mainly by answering the question: "What would you say to someone who is looking for a job in order to get him or her to apply for a job at your workplace?" The confederate was a female graduate student close in age to the majority of the subjects. The same confederate

was used for the duration of the study. Conversations were tape-recorded and the subjects were informed that they would be evaluated on the sincerity of their effort and the degree to which they were successful in persuading the confederate. Upon the conclusion of the treatment—the “sales pitch” on their job—subjects were asked to complete the post-test and schedule a time to return seven days later for the delayed post test. Both post-tests (immediate and delayed) included only the 12-item organizational commitment scale and a one item measure for overall job satisfaction.

## RESULTS

An initial examination of the data showed social desirability scores to be significantly correlated with normative commitment in the post- and delayed post-tests (see Table 1), which indicates possible bias. For this reason, social desirability was included as a covariate in the repeated measures MANCOVA performed to compare the measures of normative commitment and job satisfaction among the three tests (pre-, post- and delayed post-test). Multivariate results showed, however, that social desirability was not significant when included in the complete model ( $p > .1$ ). We therefore proceeded with a simple repeated measures MANOVA comparing normative commitment and job satisfaction across the three tests (pre-, post- and delayed post-test).

Statistically significant multivariate results of within-subjects effects were found across time on the combined DV (normative commitment and job satisfaction),  $F(4,296) = 2.965$ ,  $p > .05$ . Univariate results showed a statistically significant difference only for normative commitment,  $F(2, 148) = 5.335$ ,  $p > .05$ . The effect size was relatively small, with slightly less than 7% of the variance in the change explained by the treatment ( $\eta^2 = .067$ ). Follow-up pairwise comparisons (with Bonferroni adjustment) showed a significant difference between the pre-test and immediate post-test ( $p < .001$ ), and a significant, yet weaker, difference between the immediate post-test and the delayed post-test ( $p < .05$ ). No significant difference was found between the delayed post-test and the pre-test. Thus, in support of hypothesis 1a, there was a statistically significant increase in normative commitment from the pre-test (mean = 3.25) to the immediate post-test (mean = 3.38). The difference between the immediate post-test (mean = 3.38) and the delayed post-test (mean = 3.28) test was also significant, indicating a decrease in the level of normative commitment after seven days. The delayed post-test and the pre-test were not significantly different which indicated the effect of the treatment was short term. Therefore, we found no support for hypothesis 1b, which argued that the effect would be a

**Table 1**  
**Pearson Correlations**

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Social Desirability	Duration	Job				Normative		
					Satisfaction 1	Satisfaction 2	Satisfaction 3	Com 1	Com 2	Com 3	
Social Desirability	15.23	3.59	1								
Duration of Oral Persuasion <sup>a</sup>	8.15	2.7	.09	1							
Job Satisfaction 1	3.73	1.07	-.07	.17	1						
Job Satisfaction 2	3.85	1.05	.04	.16	.87**	1					
Job Satisfaction 3	3.77	1.05	.10	.23	.86**	.89**	1				
Normative Com 1	3.25	.87	.14	.21	.50**	.52**	.62**	1			
Normative Com 2	3.38	.88	.24*	.17	.51**	.55**	.65**	.94**	1		
Normative Com 3	3.29	.96	.24*	.21	.51**	.52**	.66**	.89**	.94**	1	

N = 75.

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

<sup>a</sup> Measured in minutes.

long lasting one. No support was found for Hypotheses 2a and 2b because there was no statistically significant difference in the measure of job satisfaction across time.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Given the hypothetical nature of the intervention, the persuasive conversation is likely to have been shorter and possibly less elaborate, than it would have been in a real life (non-experimental) situation in which something is actually at stake. The duration of the oral persuasion in the experiment lasted an average of 8 min (*SD* 2.6); however, it is likely that self-initiated referrals would last much longer. For example, an employee may engage in a referral over dinner with a friend or family member or when employees are sent to recruit, the involvement in the referral is even larger. An employee sent to a college campus to speak to students in a classroom setting is likely to give a presentation and provide great detail about his or her company in the effort of making the best impression. This observation was made by a Senior Vice President of Human Resources of a nation-wide food service organization who said: "... sometimes allowing your employees to participate in college recruiting, going into the classrooms and telling students about the company and their job, can have a significant positive effect on their own attitude towards their work and the company" (Evans, E. A., personal communication, May 3, 2001). In addition, making several referrals is likely to prolong the positive effects across time, more so than in a one-time occurrence.

A replication of this study in an organizational setting would be beneficial in overcoming some of the limitations of a laboratory-type experiment. We believe that measuring the effects of employment referrals on employee recommenders in the work setting is likely to show stronger effects than in a simulation situation. This would also allow the comparison of group differences among individuals with positive and negative or neutral work attitudes.

### *Limitations*

We were able to test only part of the ERMO model for two main reasons. First, because the decision to engage in the employment recommendation was not a result of intrinsic motivation, this experiment serves to test only that part of the ERMO model which relates to extrinsic motivation. In addition, given budgetary limitations, we were unable to recruit more students to participate in the study and it was not possible, statistically speaking, to separate the 75 respondents who completed all

parts of the study into equal groups based on job attitudes and study them separately. Therefore, there is no division, as depicted in the ERMO model, into individuals with positive work attitudes and negative work attitudes.

An additional limitation is the use of students in research. The use of this population has often been criticized as non-representative and it has been noted that the problem in recruiting research is that "only one market has been studied with any frequency ... —college graduates for entry level business and engineering positions" (Rynes, 1990, p. 432). While the experiment subjects in this study were college students, they were mostly nontraditional students who, on average, were older and working at least 20 h a week. In addition, the abundance of available work in the hospitality industry in this university's urban location offers the opportunity to study students who are employed. This has allowed us to offer more general results than was possible in previous research.

The 'artificial' aspect of the treatment likely weakened the intervention effect, where as in a natural setting, an individual who is engaging in an employment referral is likely to dedicate more time and thought to the process. We believe that the minute hypothetical nature of the intervention is the cause for the limited results. Future research should measure the effect of employee referrals on employees in a true referral situation. To have found a significant difference with the low power (Cohen, 1992), small sample size and extremely small intervention is encouraging. If making a referral in a hypothetical experimental setting has yielded results, however small, it would not be surprising to find those effects to a much larger degree in a real life setting when one is actually engaged in a referral. It is the hope of the researchers that the results of this first stage of research will lead to a connection with industry that will allow them to survey applicants who will engage in actual referrals, not simulations.

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