Competency-Based Versus Task-Based Job Descriptions: Effects on Applicant Attraction

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Abstract

In order for organizations to attract applicants, they need to ensure they are using attractive recruitment techniques. Limited previous research has examined the effect of varying types of job description formats on applicants' level of attraction to an organization. This study examined applicants' attraction to organizations based on competency-based and job-based job descriptions. Participants were finance, management, or nursing students actively or soon to be engaged in a job search. All were asked to evaluate two potential jobs based on provided job descriptions. One description was competency based and the other was task based. Job descriptions were tailored based on academic major and anticipated career goals. Personality and love of learning were also assessed as previous literature suggested these constructs could affect attraction to a particular job description. Overall results suggest no difference in attraction across the two types of job descriptions and love of learning was not related to applicant attraction. However, openness to experience was positively related to evaluations of competency-based job descriptions for nursing majors. Implications and future research are discussed.
Keywords: Job Descriptions, Competencies, Employee Attraction, Recruitment, Selection

Introduction

Organizations can fail or thrive based on their ability to attract job candidates. As the United States continues to recover from the 2007-2009 recession, organizations have an increasing number of vacant positions to fill (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). Considering this increase, organizations need to ensure effective recruiting techniques to attract the best applicants. One way organizations can attract applicants early in the recruitment phase is to provide an attractive job description. With the changing nature of work, however, the way jobs and job descriptions have been defined and organized have evolved.

Historically, jobs have been designed by managers and reflected in job descriptions as a set of relatively inflexible tasks or activities performed by individuals (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010; Lawler, 1994; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). In the 1940s, the primary focus of job analysis, and correspondingly the job descriptions created based on these analyses, was on tasks, with minimal consideration of employee attributes (Landy, Shankster-Cawley, & Moran, 1995). By 1969, however, McCormick, Jeanneret, and Mecham took an approach to job analysis that considered employee attributes; they developed the Position Analysis Questionnaire (PAQ), a job analysis method that includes worker-oriented elements. The PAQ's inclusion of these elements was a significant shift from the earlier task-oriented approaches to a focus on the worker. Some conceptualizations of this difference focus on job descriptions as task based descriptions contrasted with job specifications that focus on the qualities, traits, and skills needed by workers. Analysis of work has progressed throughout the years and more recent conceptualizations refer to these worker- or person-centric attributes as dimensions or competencies.

Despite the recent popularity of competencies in organizations, they are not a new concept. The term appeared in the literature as early as 1973, when McClelland proposed testing for competencies, instead of intelligence in schools, colleges, and work organizations. Since McClelland's 1973 paper, competencies have been applied throughout the business world and competencies are viewed as measurable and represented by sets of behavior combined with knowledge, skills, and personal attributes (ACA, 1996). One reason for the implementation of competency-based practices may be attributed to the changing nature of the work environment. Organizations are adopting more flexible organizational structures, downsizing the workforce, and de-layering their structures (Sparrow, 1998). Accordingly, researchers such as Schippmann et al. (2000) have argued that because organizations are becoming more flat, traditional job analysis procedures for generating task-based job descriptions may not play a central role in the practices of human resource management in the future.

The Present Study

Gaining an understanding of the factors that affect the attraction phase of the attraction-selection-attrition cycle (ASA) is crucial for organizations who wish to attract the most qualified applicant pool (Catanzaro, Moore, & Marshall, 2010). Applicants are often exposed early in the recruitment process to some form of a job description or advertisement. However, researchers have yet to examine how competency-based staffing processes affect applicant reactions to organizations' recruitment and selection practices.

Attempting to understand how competency-based job descriptions influence applicant attraction could have significant practical value to organizations. Accordingly, the present study examined applicants' attraction to an organization based on the presentation of competency and task-based format of the job description. Personality characteristics were examined to determine if any personal characteristics contributed to job description preference.

The following literature highlights why differences in organizational attraction could be expected based on the type of information in the job descriptions. One possible outcome, as a result of differing job descriptions, is that applicants are less attracted to competency-based job descriptions because they are more comfortable with traditional, task-based job descriptions (Lawler, 1994). Lawler (1994) proposed an alternate suggestion, noting that the competency-based approach may contribute significantly in attracting new employees and retaining existing

ones. He further noted that a competency approach, however, may be beneficial for attracting only certain types of employees; Lawler (1994) noted that applicants who are oriented toward learning new skills, taking on new responsibilities, and assisting in management of business are likely the types of applicants who would be attracted to a competency-modeled job. This might suggest that individuals' attitudes toward learning may affect their attraction to an organization, depending on the type of job description used. These research questions are examined in the present study, which examined the attraction to organizations that used either a competency or task-based job description and explored whether openness to experience or love of learning affected organizational attraction.

Job Descriptions

Job descriptions typically support key human resource decisions, including those which link competencies with functions, such as selection, training, career development, pay determination, and promotion (Lawler & Ledford, 1992; Nybø, 2004, Pavur, 2010). Accordingly, most organizations begin their approach to organizing these functions with a job description (Lawler, 1994). Job descriptions generally include a job title, reporting relationships, a summary of responsibilities, the level of decision-making authorized, and hiring requirements information (Stybel, 2010). Job descriptions that are used for recruitment are designed to gain the attention of and attract applicants (Pavur, 2010).

Properly designed job descriptions can be used to ensure that individuals will be motivated and capable of performing certain jobs (Lawler, 1994). Further, job descriptions can be used to determine the grouping of individuals into work units and as a rationalization for the overall structure of the organization (Lawler, 1994). Traditionally, job descriptions took a task-based format, but with the growing importance of aligning human resources functions for better strategic use, competency information is appearing more frequently in job descriptions.

Competency Modeling

Competency Defined

Campion et al. (2011) stated, "Competency models are much easier to use in creating HR systems than traditional job analysis information…" as a reason competency models might be becoming more popular in organizations (p. 251). The development of competency models requires a whole-person assessment, with an emphasis on individuals' potential (Rodriguez, Patel, Bright, Gregory, & Gowing, 2002). Campion et al. noted that companies such as, The Boeing Company, Microsoft, and the U.S. Department of State are already using competency models for several different processes, including selection, appraisal, promotion, and training.

Despite the growing popularity of competency modeling in organizations, research on competency modeling has not garnered the same attention, as evidenced by the lack of a precise definition of what constitutes a *competency* (Lievens, Sanchez, & de Corte, 2004). Schippmann et al. (2000) found a wide range of definitions for "competency" by surveying similarly trained subject matter experts (SMEs) and reviewing published scientific and business literature. Two examples of SMEs' definitions given were: "The knowledge, skills, and attributes that differentiate high performers from average performers" and "Observable, behavioral capabilities that are important for performing key responsibilities of a role or job." (Schippmann et al., 2000,

p. 706). Woodruffe (1993) wrote that, "A competency is the set of behavior patterns that the incumbent needs to bring to a position in order to perform its tasks and functions with competence" (p. 29). Halim and Abhyanker (2011) defined a competency as the part of a person's behavior that can be observed or demonstrated, which contributes to performance of the job. The competency-based approach is also often referred to as a skill-based approach, due to the focus on workers' skills instead of a position's tasks (Lawler, 1994).

Advantages of the Competency Approach

There are many benefits associated with using competencies in organizations. Competency models are useful for distinguishing top performers from average performers, making the link to performance more prominent than task-based models (Campion et al, 2011). Campion et al. (2011) noted that competency models are often tied to business objectives and strategies. Aligning strategy and objectives through the use of a competency model streamlines business process, a seemingly effective and convenient approach. Lievens et al. (2004) noted that competency modeling arrived on the HR radar just in time for a business environment that requires strategic alignment of practices. Competency models are most often presented in a manner that facilities understanding, lasting impressions, and ease of use (Campion et al., 2011). Edgar and Lockwood (2011) noted that identifying and using core competencies to create products and services results in significant, positive contributions to corporate competiveness.

The use of a competency-based approach may result in new and more flexible approaches to organizing (Lawler, 1994). Organizations that use the competency-based approach can take advantage of a more flexible workforce by recruiting, selecting, and training individuals with the skills required for successful performance. Lawler (1994) noted that organizations that use a competency approach can directly target the learning of new skills; this flexible approach results in a competitive advantage. With competencies' focus on individuals' skills and potential, it would seem as if competencies would be highly attractive to individuals who seek out opportunities to learn and grown in the organization. Additionally, competency approaches are more likely to emphasize long-term organizational fit as opposed to a shorter-term job match (Schippmann et al., 2000). Turnover is reduced when competencies are used in selection to determine which candidates fit in the best with the organization.

Organizational Use of Competencies

Competencies are often used to match a job with an individual during employee selection (Heinsman, de Hoogh, Koopman, & van Muijen, 2007). Unlike the task-based approach, however, the goal of selecting applicants using competencies is not to match a person to a set of tasks. It is understood that successful demonstration of competencies should lead to successful job performance. Therefore, competency-based job descriptions state the competencies individuals need for successful performance (Garman, Tyler, & Darnall, 2004).

Halim and Abhyankar (2011) noted that because of the need to identify job candidates who have the required skills, knowledge, and capabilities for a open position, organizations are adopting competency-based job descriptions to determine candidates' fit with the job opening and organization. Individuals who posses certain characteristics, for example good communication, are able to perform a variety of functions associated with those knowledge, skills, and behaviors. This allows for more flexibility across workers and aids in strategically

aligning HR processes (Lawler, 1994; Lawler & Ledford, 1992; Soderquist, Papalexandris, Ioannou, & Prastacos, 2010).

Due to the demand for moving away from traditional task-based job structures, competency modeling has seen a sharp increase in popularity among organizations since their introduction (Schippmann et al., 2000). In 1996 the ACA reported that out of 1,844 total participants from organizations, 371 had competency-base applications in practice and 886 were studying or developing competency practices for their organizations (p. 11). Lawler (1994) predicted that more competency-based organizations will appear in the future for a number of reasons and noted that it is important to research how individuals respond to competency-based organizations. It appears that this predictions has at least partially come true and there is no reason the trend will not continue into the future. In 2005, Hewitt Associates surveyed HR executives from 373 public and private U.S. companies and found that 100% of the top twenty companies and 73% of all other companies integrated competencies into their business practices. More recently, Soderquist et al. (2010) noted that the management of HR in an organization needs to continuously evolve to match the new requirements demanded by the environment and competitors. For organizations to meet these demands, they should focus more on individuals' competencies.

From Tasks to Competencies

The traditional approach to HR focuses on the jobs as a function, and careers are thought to evolve within one or two firms in a linear progression (Sullivan, 1999). In the past, most organizations structured their job descriptions by including specifications on duties and activities, a task-based approach (Lawler, 1994). Lawler (1994) noted that the task-based approach can be traced back to the era of scientific management, with Frederick Taylor's notion that jobs could be studied and specified, and the work methods used for jobs could be improved and rationalized.

Task-based descriptions are often criticized for their focus on how the job has been done in the past and their failure to recognize an individual's ability to contribute to the organization in ways that are not currently described (Lawler & Ledford, 1992). Task-based descriptions do not take into account the changing nature of work requirements; it is assumed that selecting individuals who can perform the current set of tasks associated with a position will result in the most effective organization. Cascio (1995) noted that traditional, task-based jobs represent clusters of similar tasks that are assigned to specialist workers. Rodriguez et al. (2002) noted several disadvantages of task-based analysis: their cost of time and resources, quickness to become outdated, lack of ability to make comparisons across jobs, and the fact that they are not easily integrated into other HR practices.

Despite the differences between task-based and competency-based practices, there is a considerable amount of overlap between the two concepts. Many researchers have made note of the concept of an inferential leap (Goffin & Woycheshin, 2006; Lievens et al., 2004; Soderquist et al., 2010). An inferential leap, in this case, refers to the use of task-related information for a position to determine the KSAOs and competencies that are needed for that same position (Goffin & Woycheshin, 2006; Lievens et al., 2004). The "leap" made is the inference of KSAOs and competencies that are required to perform previously identified tasks (Goffin & Woycheshin, 2006). This approach to identifying competency information uses information directly from the task-based model.

Because competencies are often derived directly from task information, this suggests that competency job descriptions are fundamentally similar to task-based formats. The approach of identifying a position's requirements and the implications of each approach, however, is different. The differences between the descriptions may result in varying reactions from applicants. Attraction to an organization may vary depending on whether a task-based or competency based job description is used. Based on the millennial generations' propensity to change jobs, it would seem likely that they would be more attracted to an organization with a job description that focuses on skills rather than position-specific tasks (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). Skills that are used and developed for a position with one organization would likely be similar to the skills required for a position with a different organization. Therefore I hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals are more attracted to an organization that describes jobs in terms of required competencies than required job tasks

This difference in job description format preference likely results from different personal characteristics of applicants, but there currently is no research on this issue (Lawler, 1994). This study examined two types of individual differences, attitude toward learning and openness to experience and their effects on organizational attraction.

Individual Differences

Openness to Experience

Individuals' personalities affect many of their life decisions, from who they choose as friends to the hobbies they take up. Accordingly, personality affects individuals' behaviors in an organizational context, as well. People are attracted to different careers as a product of their personality (Schneider, 1987). Further, personality constructs have been useful for explaining and predicting attitudes, behaviors, performance, and outcomes in organizations (Ones, Dilchert, Viswesvaran, & Judge, 2007). Based on this information, it would seem likely that individuals would also have different preferences for job descriptions based on their personality characteristics. The different formats of information may attract applicants with different personality traits.

Individuals who are open to experience tend to be curious, creative, nonconforming, and autonomous (Judge & Cable, 1997). Mussel, Winter, Gelleri, and Schuler (2011) noted that openness to experience is highly relevant in business domains such as job advertisements, competence profiles, and definitions of organizational culture; they listed creativity, willingness to learn, thinking out of the box, curiosity, flexibility, open-mindedness, and adaptability as the openness attributes that most likely to be expressed in job advertisements. Competency-based descriptions are not often included in job advertisements, and thus, may appear to be a new form of displaying information about a position. Individuals who are open to experience are likely to be more attracted to organizations that use competencies in job descriptions. As previously mentioned, flexibility is a key component of competency-based models, and individual who are more flexible are likely to be attracted to organizations that allow for flexibility (Lawler, 1994; Lawler & Ledford, 1992; Soderquist et al., 2010). Flexibility is expressed through the listing of skills, instead of specific job tasks. Individuals who are not bound by the comfort of traditional, task-based job descriptions and are open to experience are expected to be more attracted to

organizations that use competency-based job description. It was expected that individuals who score higher in openness to experience will be more attracted to organizations that highlight flexibility via broad individual traits than organizations that use specific inflexible tasks, task-based models. Therefore I hypothesized:

Hypothesis 2:   The difference between individuals' competency-based and task-based organizational attraction ratings is greater for individuals who are more open to experience.

The literature does not suggest any links between emotional stability, extraversion, agreeableness, or conscientiousness with attraction to different organizational structures or job description formats. These four traits will not likely affect applicants' attraction to organizations using different formats of the job descriptions. The willingness to learn component of openness to experience is particularly relevant to the present study, and thus, attitude toward learning was investigated further.

Attitude toward Learning

Due to the constantly evolving work environment, organizations have begun to focus on more strategic and dynamic approaches to organizing work (Pang, Chua, & Chu, 2008). This shift is in line with competency–based job descriptions. With organizations beginning to view employees as human capital assets, it is important that employees have the characteristics that match a position's needed competencies. Some individuals, however, may not find the competency approach attractive. Some individuals may be used to jobs being defined in terms of tasks; individuals may prefer knowing the details of the job they will be doing rather than what traits an ideal candidate possesses. Applicants and incumbents who are flexible in the way they do their work and seek opportunities to learn and grow would have good fit with organizations that use competency-based practices.

The set of skills an individual starts a job with may not be the same required for high performance 10 years after being hired; for many jobs, especially knowledge workers, employees must be willing to continually learn in order to capitalize on the assets he or she brings to his or her position (Ward, 2007). The American Society of Training and Development (2011) stated that competencies provide a means to discuss various career paths and ways for employees to develop and leverage their strengths.

Lawler (1994) suggested that employees who are oriented toward learning new skills are more likely than those who are not oriented toward learning to be attracted to a skill or competency-based model. Therefore, attitude toward learning could affect the relationship between attraction to organizations and the type of job description information the organizations present. Organizations may be able to take advantage of competency-based descriptions to attract applicants who are likely to be devoted to learning. Attracting these types of employees, however, would be most beneficial to organizations that emphasize a learning culture as well as knowledge-based and service-based workforces.

Hypothesis 3: The difference between individuals' competency and task-based organizational attraction ratings is greater for individuals with a more positive attitude toward learning.

Attraction

Applicant attraction is an attitude or general, positive emotion of an individual toward an organization (Aiman-Smith, Bauer, & Cable, 2001). Braddy, Meade, Michael, and Fleenor (2009) noted that the attraction component of Schneider's (1987) ASA model suggests that job seekers obtain information about an organization, including the organization's culture, from the sources that are available to decide if they should pursue employment with the organization. The sources by which applicants obtain employment information act as a primary influence on initial attitudes toward the recruiting organizations (Zottoli & Wanous, 2000). General impressions of an organization's recruitment images are strong predictors of applicants' attraction and job choice decisions (Lee, Hwang, Yeh, 2013). In the present study, the only difference in organizational image is the presentation of requirements in either the form of competencies (applicant-focused) or tasks (job-focused). Attraction to an organization, as a result of early impressions, is related to job acceptance decisions (Powell & Goulet, 1996).

It is important to understand how individuals interpret information, and thus affects their attraction to organizations. Ssignaling theory proposes that applicants interpret the information they have about an organization as signals of organizational characteristics, in the absence of complete information (Turban, 2001). The theory does not specify what variables applicants interpret to make their decisions but can explain the influence of many predictors on organizational attraction (Erhart & Ziegert, 2005). The job description information in the present study was manipulated so that the only the type of requirements, competencies or tasks, differed, and would elicit different interpretations of the organizations advertising the positions.

Schneider, Goldstein, and Smith (1995) noted that the organizational attraction process is related to the fact that people's preferences for particular organizations are based on judgments of the congruence of their personal characteristics and the characteristics of potential work organizations. In other words, because people differ in terms of their values and preferences, the attractiveness of organizations will also differ because of variability in the characteristics of the organizations. In the present study, a point of interest is whether the personal characteristics of attitude toward learning and personality traits affects attraction to an organization on the basis of the format of the job description used in recruitment. It is unknown, however, whether attraction to the same position, in the same organization would differ depending on whether the job description is presented with competency or task-based information. Previous research has not examined the usefulness of competencies to attract and recruit applicants.

Method

Participants

Participants were 258 undergraduate students from a midsized, public university in the southern United States. Data collection targeted junior and senior level undergraduates who were nearing graduation and actively searching for employment within one year. Finance (*n*= 111, 43%), management (*n*= 82, 31.8%), and nursing majors (*n*= 65, 25.2%) participated in this study. Of the participants, 50% were male and the average age was 23.37 years (*SD*=5.32). In terms of race/ethnicity, 220 participants reported being Caucasian (85.3%), 22 African American (8.4%), 5 Asian (1.9%), 4 Hispanic (1.6%), and 7 "other" (2.7%).

A total of 132 participants (51.4%) reported having previous work experience in their field of study while 125 (48.6%) reported no previous experience. A total of 247 participants (95.7%) reported that they would be seeking a job within their field of study upon graduation, and 11 participants (4.3%) reported they would not seek a job within their field upon graduation. A total of 99 participants (38.5%) reported they were currently seeking a job in their field compared to 157 (61.1%) who indicated they were not currently seeking a job, and one participant did not respond to this question (0.4%). A total of 214 participants (82.9%) indicated they would be searching for a job in the next 6 months to one year and 44 (17.1%) indicated they would not be searching for a job in the next 6 months to one year. A total of 37 participants (14.4%) reported working full-time, 138 (53.7%) part-time, 81 unemployed (31.5%), and one participant did not respond (0.4%).

Materials

Conditions

The descriptions for each field of study represented the same position advertised, but the competency-based description listed the competencies required for the position and the task-based description listed the tasks an applicant is required to perform. Finance majors viewed descriptions for a financial analyst position. Management majors viewed descriptions for a general manager position. Nursing majors viewed job descriptions for a registered nurse position. Many of the students had experience in their field and may have decided the specific position was not one they desired. All other aspects of the descriptions were parallel to each other to ensure the only difference in the descriptions was the format they were presented in. In addition to the use of SMEs and pilot data, participants were asked to rate the readability of each job description and their understanding of the information on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated difficult to read and understand and 7 indicated easy to read and understand, to control for any affects these variable could have had on ratings of attraction.

Competency-based descriptions (M = 5.77, SD = 1.38) and task-based descriptions (M = 5.79, SD =1.34) were similar in terms of ease of read, t (257) = -.13, p =.89. Competency-based descriptions (M = 5.87, SD = 1.32) and task-based descriptions (M = 5.89, SD = 1.24) did not differ significantly in individuals' ability to understand the information presented t (256) = -.19, p = .85. Thus, any differences in organizational attraction ratings cannot be contributed to the readability or ease of understanding of the information in the descriptions.

Attraction

The attraction measure (Highhouse et al., 2003) consisted of ten items, with two highly correlated subscales, general attraction and intentions to pursue employment. The attraction measure was included twice in the study, once for attraction to the organization using the competency-based job description and again for the organization using the task-based description. Because the subscales were so highly correlated (competency (r = .83, p < .01); task-based (r = .85, p < .01)), they were analyzed as one measure of attraction in the present study. The attraction measure used for analysis, thus consisted of 10 items on a seven-point scale. For consistency with the other measures, this was a modification from the original five-point scale, (1=*strongly disagree*; 7=*strongly agree*).   A high score indicates a high level of

attraction to an organization. The attraction measure was reliable for the organization with the competency-based description ($\alpha = .94$) and the organization with the task-based description ($\alpha = .95$).

Personality

To assess personality traits, the 50-item Big Five measure was used. A high score on each of the five personality sub-scales indicates a greater association between that personality trait and the individual. The answer responses were presented using a seven-point Likert response format. A high score on each scale indicates a greater association with the personality trait (1=*strongly disagree*; 7=*strongly agree*). Extraversion ($\alpha = .91$), conscientiousness ($\alpha = .81$), neuroticism ($\alpha = .85$), agreeableness ($\alpha = .84$), and openness to experience ($\alpha = .79$) were measured.

Love of Learning

Attitude toward learning was measured using the Love of Learning scale, which is a 10-item scale ($\alpha = .75$) from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP). This was presented using a seven-point Likert scale response format (1=*strongly disagree*; 7=*strongly agree*). A high score on the Love of Learning scale indicates a more positive attitude toward learning.

Procedure

A pilot study was conducted with 33 participants to evaluate participants' comments on the job descriptions. In the pilot study, the participants completed all portions of the study; they were give a consent form, rated their attraction to the organizations based on the two job descriptions, rated their love of learning, rated their personality, and filled out their demographic information. As a result of the pilot study, the length of time participants viewed each job description was shortened, salary information was included, and some job tasks were revised to more accurately represent the field of interest. The remaining procedures were the same for the pilot and actual study.

The informed consent form was first administered to each participant. Before proceeding to the study, the researcher also verbally indicated that participation was voluntary and then briefly explained that participation would require the students to view two different job descriptions for a type of position they could expect upon graduation. The informed consent form provided contact information for the primary researcher as well as the contact e-mail address of the supervising faculty.

Each participant received a task-based and a competency-based job description that was tailored to an entry level job one would expect to obtain with a bachelor's degree in the participant's field of study. The job descriptions were developed through an analysis of current online job advertisements, job descriptions, competency libraries, O*NET profiles, and the pilot study. Five industrial-organizational psychology specialists and HR representatives were given the job descriptions for each field of study to ensure the competencies and tasks represented the same job, the formats of each type of job description were similar, and the wording was similar. The competency and task-based descriptions both had the same tense of words, number of bullet

points (requirements), and similar word counts to control for any extraneous affects on attraction to the organizations.

Students within each of the three major fields targeted for this study were recruited with the assistance of professors from each of the three disciplines. Participants read and signed a consent form to participate in the study. Participants read and studied the first job description (the order of the job descriptions were randomly assigned) for two and a half minutes. After the two and a half minutes were over, participants rated their attraction to the organization using either a competency or task-based description on Highhouse et al.'s (2003) attraction measure. Participants were asked what influenced their ratings to gain additional insight to their preferences. After viewing and rating the first job description, participants were given two and a half minutes to view the second description; after the time was up, they rated their attraction to the second organization's job description. If the first job description seen was competency-based then the second description was task-based and vice versa. Participants then responded to the measures of attitude toward learning, personality traits, and demographic characteristics.

Results

Correlations and descriptive statistics for all majors are presented in Table 1. Finance majors' correlations and descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2. Management majors' correlations and descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3. Nursing majors' correlations and descriptive statistics are presented in Table 4.

Paired samples t-test analyses were conducted to test the first hypotheses that the organization using competency-based job descriptions would be rated as more attractive than the organization that used task-based descriptions. There was not a significant difference in the overall attraction rating between the organization using the competency-based description ($M = 51.34$, $SD = 11.60$) and the organization using the task-based description ($M = 50.45$, $SD = 12.46$), $t(257) = 1.13$, $p = .26$. Cohen's effect size value ($d = .07$) suggested low practical significance. Therefore, hypothesis 1 was not supported.

A bivariate Pearson correlation was conducted to analyze the relationship between the difference score of competency-task-based overall attraction ratings with openness to experience. It was expected that higher openness to experience scores would be positively related to competency minus task overall attraction difference scores. Openness to experience was not related to greater overall attraction to organizations with competency-based descriptions ($r = -.01$, $p = .83$). When an analysis which was filtered by major was conducted, however, it was found that openness to experience was significantly, positively related to the competency-task difference overall attraction score ($r = .25$, $p < .05$) for nursing majors. Further openness was significantly, positively related to the competency base scores for general attraction ($r = .34$, $p < .01$) and intentions to pursue employment for nursing majors ($r = .27$, $p = .03$), with openness' relationship to general attraction achieving a moderate effect size. The opposite effect was found for the relationship between openness to experience and competency-task overall attraction difference scores ($r = -.25$, $p = .03$) and for the base scale for intentions to pursue employment based on the competency description for management majors ($r = -.32$, $p < .01$), which demonstrated a moderate effect size for the relationship between openness and intentions to pursue. Based on analysis of the individual majors' responses, partial support was found for hypothesis two.

A bivariate Pearson correlation was conducted to analyze the relationship between the overall attraction difference score of competency-task with love of learning. It was expected that individuals who reported higher love of learning would be more attracted to organizations with competency-based descriptions than organizations with task-based descriptions. When all majors were included in the analysis, a significant relationship between the competency-task overall attraction difference score and love of learning was not found ($r = -.07$, $p = .27$). When cases were filtered by major, it was found that love of learning was significantly negatively related to the competency-task overall attraction difference score ($r = -.23$, $p = .04$) for management majors, a relatively small effect size. Thus, no support was found for hypotheses three.

Additional Analyses

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine which variables predict the overall attraction score. Age, sex, and grade point average (GPA) were entered in the first step as control variables, and openness to experience and love of learning were entered second. The three demographic measures accounted for a non-significant amount of variability in attraction differences, $R^2 = .01$, $F (3, 246) = .55$, $p = .65$. Openness to experience and love of learning did not account for a significant proportion of difference in attraction variance after controlling for the effects of age, sex, and GPA, R^2 change = .01, $F (2, 244) = .87$, $p = .51$.

For completeness and because they are often measured together, all personality variables were included in a correlation analysis. Neuroticism was found to be significantly negatively related to general attractiveness of competency descriptions ($r = .15$, $p = .02$), general attractiveness of task descriptions ($r = .19$, $p < .01$), intentions to pursue employment for competency descriptions ($r = -.15$, $p = .02$), and intentions to pursue employment for task descriptions ($r = .22$, $p < .01$). Agreeableness was significantly positively related to general attractiveness of task-based descriptions ($r = .20$, $p < .01$) and intentions to pursue employment for task-base descriptions ($r = .16$, $p < .01$). Further, agreeableness was negatively related to the difference between competency and task general attraction scores ($r = -.12$, $p < .05$).

The correlations conducted with all personality, attraction, and love of learning variables, filtered by major, indicated that nursing majors' openness to experiences was positively related to general attraction ($r = .34$, $p < .01$) and intentions to pursue employment ($r = .37$, $p < .01$) for competency-based descriptions. The relationship between openness to experience and intentions to pursue employment for competency-based descriptions approached significance ($r = -.21$, $p = .06$) for management majors. Agreeableness was significantly negatively related to the competency minus task intentions difference score ($r = -.29$, $p = .02$) for nursing majors. Agreeableness was significantly positively related to task general attraction ($r = .20$, $p = .04$) for finance majors.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if any differences across variables were affected by academic major. Agreeableness differed significantly across the majors, $F (2, 255) = 10.23$, $p < .01$. Love of learning also differed significantly across the majors, $F (2, 255) = 5.11$, $< .01$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons of the three groups indicated that nursing majors ($M = 59.03$) rated themselves as significantly more agreeable than finance ($M = 54.25$) and management ($M = 53.73$) majors. Post-hoc analyses indicated that nursing majors ($M = 55.54$) rated themselves as having a greater love of learning than finance ($M = 52.26$) or management ($M = 51.74$) majors.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlation Matrix for All Majors

Measure	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Competency Overall Attraction	51.34	11.60	--										
2. Task Overall Attraction	50.45	12.46	.45 **	--									
3. Competency General Attraction	25.51	6.39	.96 **	.41 **	--								
4. Task General Attraction	25.06	6.82	.45 **	.97 **	.45 **	--							
5. Competency Intentions	25.83	5.73	.95 **	.44 **	.83 **	.40 **	--						
6. Task Intentions	25.38	6.14	.41 **	.96 **	.34 **	.85 **	.45 **	--					
7. Overall Attraction Difference Score	.45	6.34	.48 **	-.58 **	.48 **	-.54 **	.43 **	-.57 **	--				
8. General Attraction Difference Score	.45	6.96	.45 **	-.57 **	.48 **	-.57 **	.37 **	-.52 **	.97 **	--			
9. Intentions Difference Score	.45	6.21	.47 **	-.54 **	.43 **	-.47 **	.47 **	-.57 **	.96 **	.86 **	--		
10. Love of Learning	52.92	7.83	-.03	.04	-.05	.04	-.02	.04	-.07	-.08	-.05	--	
11. Openness to Experience	51.20	7.62	.05	.06	.05	.05	.04	.07	-.01	.00	-.03	.42 **	--

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics Pearson Correlation Matrix for Finance Majors

Measure	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Competency Overall Attraction	50.05	13.32	--										
2. Task Overall Attraction	49.55	14.60	.49 **	--									
3. Competency General Attraction	24.61	7.45	.97 **	.45 **	--								
4. Task General Attraction	24.23	8.14	.47 **	.98 **	.46 **	--							
5. Competency Intentions	25.43	6.41	.95 **	.50 **	.84 **	.44 **	--						
6. Task Intentions	25.32	6.89	.48 **	.97 **	.41 **	.88 **	.52 **	--					
7. Overall Attraction Difference Score	.25	7.10	.44 **	-.57 **	.45 **	-.56 **	.39 **	-.55 **	--				
8. General Attraction Difference Score	.39	8.15	.42 **	-.57 **	.46 **	-.58 **	.33 **	-.51 **	.97 **	--			
9. Intentions Difference Score	.11	6.56	.43 **	-.53 **	.40 **	-.50 **	.44 **	-.55 **	.96 **	.86 **	--		
10. Love of Learning	52.26	8.60	-.05	-.01	-.07	-.01	-.03	-.02	-.04	-.06	-.01	--	
11. Openness to Experience	51.11	7.65	.05	.05	.04	.05	.05	.06	-.01	-.01	-.02	.48 **	--

*p < .05.   **p < .01.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlation Matrix for Management Majors

Measure	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Competency Overall Attraction	51.61	10.49	--										
2. Task Overall Attraction	49.96	11.17	.51 **	--									
3. Competency General Attraction	25.73	5.75	.96 **	.47 **	--								
4. Task General Attraction	25.07	6.02	.54 **	.95 **	.55 **	--							
5.Competency Intentions	25.88	5.25	.95 **	.51 **	.82 **	.49 **	--						
6. Task Intentions	24.89	5.73	.43 **	.95 **	.34 **	.81 **	.48 **	--					
7. Overall Attraction Difference Score	.83	5.36	.48 **	-.54 **	.45 **	-.46 **	.40 **	-.57 **	--				
8. General Attraction Difference Score	.66	5.60	.40 **	-.54 **	.44 **	-.51 **	.32 **	-.52 **	.95 **	--			
9. Intentions Difference Score	.99	5.63	.45 **	-.49 **	.42 **	-.37 **	.45 **	-.57 **	.95 **	.82 **	--		
10. Love of Learning	51.74	6.31	-.17	.06	-.18	.04	-.14	.07	-.23 *	-.24 *	-.20	--	
11.Openness to Experience	51.54	7.71	-.16	.09	-.10	.05	-.21	.13	-.25 *	-.16	-.32 **	.36 **	--

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlation Matrix for Nursing Majors

Measure	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Competency Overall Attraction	53.22	9.48	--										
2. Task Overall Attraction	52.58	9.66	.16	--									
3. Competency General Attraction	26.77	4.87	.95 **	.12	--								
4. Task General Attraction	26.48	4.88	.13	.95 **	.16	--							
5.Competency Intentions	26.45	5.06	.96 **	.18	.82 **	.10	--						
6. Task Intentions	26.11	5.21	.17	.96 **	.09	.83 **	.24	--					
7. Overall Attraction Difference Score	.32	6.20	.64 **	-.66 **	.63 **	-.64 **	.59 **	-.62 **	--				
8. General Attraction Difference Score	.29	6.34	.63 **	-.64 **	.65 **	-.65 **	.55 **	-.57 **	.98 **	--			
9. Intentions Difference Score	.34	6.34	.62 **	-.65 **	.59 **	-.60 **	.60 **	-.63 **	.98 **	.91 **	--		
10. Love of Learning	55.54	7.69	.09	.07	.07	.08	.09	.06	.01	-.01	.03	--	
11.Openness to Experience	50.94	7.55	.37 **	.05	.34 **	.06	.37 **	.03	.25 *	.21	.27 **	.42 **	--

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 5 Personality Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlation Matrix for All Majors

Measure	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Competency Overall Attraction	51.34	11.60	--												
2. Task Overall Attraction	50.45	12.46	.45 **	--											
3. Competency General Attraction	25.51	6.39	.96 **	.41 **	--										
4. Task General Attraction	25.06	6.82	.45 **	.97 **	.45 **	--									
5. Competency Intentions	25.83	5.73	.95 **	.44 **	.83 **	.40 **	--								
6. Task Intentions	25.38	6.14	.41 **	.96 **	.34 **	.85 **	.45 **	--							
7. Overall Attraction Difference Score	.45	6.34	.48 **	-.58 **	.48 **	-.54 **	.43 **	-.57 **	--						
8. General Attraction Difference Score	.45	6.96	.45 **	-.57 **	.48 **	-.57 **	.37 **	-.52 **	.97 **	--					
9. Intentions Difference Score	.45	6.21	.47 **	-.54 **	.43 **	-.47 **	.47 **	-.57 **	.96 **	.86 **	--				
10. Extraversion	46.67	11.29	.08	-.03	.06	-.02	.09	-.04	.10	.07	.12	--			
11. Agreeableness	55.29	8.02	.08	.19 **	.08	.20 **	.06	.16 **	-.12	-.12 *	-.10	.18 **	--		
12. Conscientiousness	52.26	8.45	.09	.04	.06	.04	.11	.05	.04	.02	.06	.00	.15 *	--	
13. Neuroticisim	33.01	9.86	-.15 *	-.21 **	-.15 *	-.19 **	-.15 *	-.22	.07	.05	.09	-.19 **	-.04	-.06	--

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Discussion

It was the aim of this study to examine the effects of competency-based information presented in job descriptions on applicants' attraction. Participants did not rate competency-based job descriptions as more overall attractive than task-based job descriptions, as was proposed in Hypotheses 1. As Lawler (1994) discussed, individuals may be used to and therefore more comfortable initially with task information. It may take a while before individuals accept the use of competencies in organizations. Since this study presented information as solely task or competency-based, in an early recruitment phase, individuals may not have felt as attracted to competency-based descriptions if they had not experienced the use of competencies in organizations before. Presenting only competency information in job descriptions, an artificial manipulation of the present study, does not appear to be significantly more useful in attracting applicants than presenting only task-based information.

Participants may not have made a distinction between the competency and task-based descriptions. Other information about the job and organization was provided, and no measures were taken to ensure participants read all parts of the job description. Applicants may have chosen information, other than the competency or task information to make their decisions. Overall attraction to organizations using competency-based descriptions was significantly, positively related to overall attraction to organizations using task-based descriptions for finance and management participants (See Tables 2 and 3). Participants may have made their decisions based on the information that was common between job descriptions (salary, years of experience, educational requirements, etc.). Salary is one of the most influential factors for organizational attraction (Rynes & Barber, 1990). The salary information in the present study, however, was the same for both organizational descriptions and would not lead individuals to find one organization more attractive than the other based on salary (Cunningham, 2008).

Hypothesis two was partially supported. Overall, higher openness to experience scores were not correlated with higher competency-task overall attraction difference scores. Higher openness to experience scores was associated with a greater competency-task overall and intention difference scores for nursing majors. Openness to experience was also positively and significantly related to general attraction and intentions to pursue employment scale scores for competency-based descriptions among nursing students. It was expected that the more open to experience an individual is, the more he or she would be attracted to a flexible, competency job description. This relationship was present for nursing majors.

A potential explanation for this finding may be a result of the actual competencies listed as requirements for the different job positions, which varied by major. The competency, adaptability, was listed for the registered nurse and financial analyst positions, but it was not listed for the general manager position. Considering adaptability is a component of openness, the ASA theory would suggest that individuals who are open to experience would be more attracted to organizations who value openness to experience; individuals who are high in openness to experience would likely be more attracted to organizations with open-oriented information (i.e. adaptability requirement) presented in their job descriptions (Schneider, 1987). Since no key descriptors of openness were included in the general management competency description, this may have negatively affected the relationship between openness to experience and attraction to organizations with competency information.

Hypotheses three was not supported. It was actually found that there was a significant relationship between love of learning and competency-task overall attraction difference scores

for management majors, but this relationship was not in the direction it was expected. Higher love of learning scores were associated with a lower competency-task difference score on overall attractiveness for management majors. This indicates that a greater love of learning, or a more positive attitude about learning, does not result in greater attraction to competency-based job descriptions for management majors. Further, regression analyses revealed that while controlling for age, sex, and GPA, neither openness to experience nor love of learning were predictors of attraction to organizations using either competency or task-based information.

The findings from hypothesis three do not agree with Lawler's (1994) suggestion that employees who are oriented toward learning new skills would be the most attracted to a competency-based model. It certainly was not expected that love of learning would be negatively related to the difference between competency and task general attraction ratings. Since competencies are focused on individuals' skills and their potential, individuals who had a higher love of learning were expected to rate competency-based descriptions as more generally attractive (Rodriguez et al., 2002). It may be the case, however, that individuals who viewed the general manager position did not view that particular position as having room for growth and the ability to further learn and develop skills.

While a focus on individuals' competencies typically indicates an organization's willingness to invest in employees, simply listing the required competencies instead of tasks does make a clear link to investment in employees' knowledge and skills. Even if individuals were able to make the distinction between the job description with competencies and the one with tasks, there was no direct indication that the organization with the competency information was willing to invest in employees' skills through continuous learning and training opportunities. This may explain why a positive correlation between love of learning and competency-task general attraction and intentions to pursue employment difference scores was not found.

Limitations of the Present Study

As with any study, the present one has its limitations. First, although the study recruited students that were, or soon would, be actively involved in a job search, the fact remains that it was a student sample. Thus, the results may not generalize to other populations. Since the purpose of the study was to examine job applicants' preferences for particular job descriptions, it would have been ideal to collect data from non-student individuals who were seeking employment at the time of the study. Additionally, only finance, management, and nursing majors were included in the sample. These students were chosen because they represented and applied field and job descriptions could be created based on actual existing job openings being advertised. It would be useful in future research to consider other majors and types of jobs as well as more senior (i.e., not fresh out of college) job seekers.

The same company name and description were used for all job descriptions. As previously mentioned, the competency and task-based descriptions are often fundamentally similar; efforts were taken in this study to make sure the competencies represented the tasks in the descriptions. In fact, competency and task general attraction, and competency and task intentions to pursue were significantly and positively correlated. Both job descriptions provided little organization-specific information, had the same salary information, listed the same educational and previous experience requirements, and included the same company name and description; this may have resulted in participants rating the descriptions similarly. As

previously mentioned in the discussion, participants may not have read or been able to distinguish the competency and task information portions of the job descriptions.

Practical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Although not a hypothesis of this study, it was found through additional analyses that agreeableness was significantly and positively related to general attraction and intentions to pursue employment based on task-descriptions. Individuals who are agreeable may not have wanted to challenge the way job descriptions have traditionally been presented. Individuals who are high in neuroticism were less likely to report being attracted to or rate high intentions to pursue employment based on either description. It would seem likely that other personal traits would affect attraction to competencies or tasks.

The results from this study suggest that competencies may not be useful in the attraction stage of recruitment, especially when other factors are controlled for, as they were in the present study. Other factors, such as, salary, benefits, and job availability may be more useful for applicant attraction. Correspondingly, competencies may be more useful for functions such as realistic job previews and administration. Because organizations are able to align many HR functions through the use of competencies, future research should examine employee satisfaction of employees in organizations which use competencies to align multiple functions; competencies can be used in selection assessment, training needs assessment, promotion, and pay determination (Lievens et al., 2004). Competency models are also prevalent and invasive in many organizations. Future research should examine how the use of competency models affects employee satisfaction with various competency-focused functions. While organizations may not rely on providing competency information to recruit employees, competencies are useful for organizations in many other domains; it is important to examine employees' attitudinal and behavioral responses to such practices.

Although one of the present study's aims was to contribute to the competency literature, the main outcome variable was organizational attraction. Attracting talented and qualified applicants to organizations is an imperative function for organizational success. Future research could examine what applicants are attracted to in an organization by having participants create their own, ideal job descriptions. Participants could write what they are looking for and most attracted to in a job description/advertisement. Basic guidelines could be given for the creation of the job descriptions, and the information participants included could be analyzed. Instead of presenting applicants with information that may seem attractive to employers and HR specialists, information that actual job applicants want in a job description could be used to attraction individuals.

This study has implications for practice in organizations. The incorporation of competency modeling has many strategic benefits for organizations. Competencies help align business functions and allow for more flexibility (Lievens et al., 2004). While it was expected that competencies would also be beneficial for attracting talent to organizations, this study did not find evidence that competency-based descriptions are better at attracting applicants than task-based descriptions. Since competencies have clear benefits for aligning HR functions, they should not be left out of the recruitment phase. Organizations likely benefit from providing both task and competency information in a single job description. Providing details about the job itself (task information), as well as a description of the type of person who would succeed on the

job (competency information) gives candidates more information to help determine fit and attraction to the organization.

Despite the limitations, the present study contributed to the organizational competency literature. Previous studies had not examined the effects of competencies on job applicants. While this study found no significant difference in attraction to organizations using either a competency or task-based description, future research could examine variables that may affect attraction that were not included in this study. Future research should also examine why different variables for differing fields of study affected attraction to organizations.

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