

The Impact of Competency Statements on Résumés for Short-listing Decisions

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Sixty-two managers and human resource consultants rated a series of genuine résumés with covering letters. The résumés were manipulated to contain varying amounts of information about the candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities (competency statements). This information appeared at different locations in the résumé and covering letter. In addition, half the managers were provided with extra job requirement details beyond the job advertisement. Managers rated the candidate résumés for candidate suitability, decision to interview and overall ranking. The inclusion of competency statements resulted in higher manager ratings. However, the location of the competency statements did not influence ratings given to résumés. Further, the extra information provided to managers did not influence their ratings. The results replicate and extend an earlier study by Earl, Bright and Adams (1998) and challenge the idea that selection decisions are largely based on the notion of applicant fit. The results suggest that the inclusion on the résumé of statements that address job competencies even in a general fashion will boost an applicant's chances of being short-listed.

The résumé is widely regarded as a fundamental component in the job search process. The use of the résumé is a principal tool in employment selection from the perspective of both the candidate and the prospective employer. It provides a means for employers to short-list candidates and the opportunity for applicants to market their skills and abilities, and impress the reader. Despite this, it is perhaps surprising that empirical and theoretical research in this area is lacking in comparison to other aspects of the selection process such as the job interview or selection testing (Brown and Campion 1994; Helwig 1985; Ryland and Rosen 1987; Stephens, Watt and Hobbs 1979). Furthermore, much of the advice on résumé writing is anecdotal and based on intuition or personal experiences (Bright and Davies 1999; Bright and Earl, forthcoming).

Résumés often represent the initial point of contact between an applicant and an organization. Consequently, the impression formed on the basis of a résumé may determine whether a candidate is short-listed and progresses to the next stage of the selection process (Knouse 1994; Welch 1991). In light of this, theory-driven research is required to ascertain the extent to which candidates are able to influence the impression they create on prospective employers. Impression management theory may be applied in this context.

According to impression management theory, people employ tactics to attempt to construct

and convey a particular image by controlling the information available to others (Kacmar and Carlson 1994). Specifically, in the job search process these are employed by candidates to control the perceived impression of their experience, competence and suitability for a particular job (Gilmore and Ferris 1989; Knouse 1994).

Impression management in this context involves the use of a range of tactics that attempt to control the images a candidate portrays to the prospective employer. Typically, these behaviours have been studied in dynamic interactions such as employment interviews, however, a central theme in our résumé research is that many of the concepts developed in research into the selection interview have application in the domain of résumés. These tactics include attempts by the candidate to concentrate the conversation towards areas of personal strength in the interview (self-focusing). The use of verbal strategies such as self-promotion and embellishment, which aim to make the job seeker appear as qualified for the job as possible is another popular tactic (Gilmore and Ferris 1989; Kacmar, Delery and Ferris 1992).

The attractiveness and gender of the candidate have also been found to influence recruiters' perceptions of candidates. Marlowe, Schneider and Nelson (1996) investigated whether these factors affected ratings and rankings given to four equivalent résumé data

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sheets which included candidate photographs. Sadly, and predictably, they found that less attractive candidates and females in particular, were clearly disadvantaged compared to more attractive candidates and males. Further, Knouse (1989) found that letters of recommendation regarding candidates were susceptible to impression management techniques. Knouse (1989) attributed this to the free-form nature of recommendation letters that facilitated the free expression of the writer's views in regard to the applicant. The findings of these studies provide support for the notion that impression management techniques play a considerable role regarding the success of the candidate in the selection process. Bright, Earl and Adams (1997) found that résumés judged to be written by the candidate were rated more highly when they were presented in continuous prose rather than bullet points. This is consistent with Knouse's contention that free-form prose allows room for impression management techniques.

The use of impression management on résumés in the form of self-descriptive statements have been found to enhance the reader's perception of an applicant's interpersonal skills and self-confidence (Knouse 1994). Competency statements can be likened to impression management statements as they also refer to claims made by a candidate to impress or attempt to control the image others have of them. A competency statement (Bright *et al.* 1997; Earl *et al.* 1998) is a succinct description of a candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities in relation to a specific job competency as identified in the job advertisement, or accompanying documentation. For example, competency statements may focus on a candidate's 'motivation', 'market knowledge', 'energy', 'communication skills', etc. Gardner and Martinko (1988) argue that one type of impression management tactic is self-description, such as a candidate in an interview saying that they are 'a great communicator'. It would appear that our definition of competency statements closely fits this concept of an impression management tactic. However, it can also be argued that such self-descriptive statements merely convey job-relevant information, and therefore cannot really be considered as true impression management techniques that are more about creating an illusion rather than conveying information. The critical point here is that 'illusory' impression management statements also convey information, they are purposely designed to convey a positive image of the candidate. They are illusory in the sense that the information provided cannot be substantiated as readily as, say, academic results or work history. Thus competency statements of a general nature (e.g. 'Energetic: I am always on the go') are more akin

to impression management techniques, whereas more specific statements (e.g. 'Good communicator: I won the school's debating prize in 1994') are closer to more readily verifiable statements of fact.

Bright *et al.* (1997) provide support for Knouse's (1994) findings that the inclusion of self-descriptive competency or impression management statements in a résumé significantly improve perceptions of the candidate on a number of measures including suitability for the job.

Furthermore, Earl *et al.* (1998) investigated the impact of intent and competency statements in résumés prior rated as 'poor' and 'good'. They found that résumés that included competency statements had a significantly better chance of being short-listed for an interview than those that did not include them. Specifically, they found that résumés prior rated as 'poor' particularly benefited from the inclusion of a competency statement (30% more candidates interviewed) compared to résumés prior judged as 'good' (10% more candidates interviewed). In addition, the presence of competency statements relating to energy, sales market knowledge and motivation improved a résumé's ratings on other competencies such as initiative and responsibility and achievement orientation. Earl *et al.* explain that these secondary benefits can be attributed to the fact that 'recruiters' interpret the extra effort by candidates as evidence of other attributes' (*ibid.*, p. 12).

This finding is consistent with the suggestions of Knouse (1989), who reviewed the influence of the attributions of potential employers in regard to a number of selection instruments, including résumés. Knouse (1989) concluded that recruiters may make attributions or inferences about a candidate based on the information presented in their résumé, which may then influence the decision to interview as well as other aspects of the selection process.

However, in contrast, an earlier study by Knouse *et al.* (1988) found that impression management tactics resulted in lower ratings of the cover letter, and particularly the résumé. These results indicate that using impression management statements may act to downgrade rather than improve perceptions of a candidate. Further, the research by Bright *et al.* revealed that the effectiveness of competency statements was offset by the fact that they were associated with lower ratings of candidate honesty. They explain that this may be the result of a mismatch between the evidence contained in the résumé and the claims made in the competency statements.

Impression management techniques do seem to have a positive impact when applied to résumés, however, it is unclear what processes

underpin this impact. The present study addresses some of these questions, by extending the research by Earl *et al.* Previous studies have found that including competency statements on résumés boosts ratings, but it is not clear whether this positive impact is due to the provision of extra information relating to a particular aspect of the job, or whether the presence of a competency statement makes a more global impression on the manager.

Person–environment fit models of selection predict that the strongest candidates will appear to fit the job the most closely (e.g. Bretz, Rynes and Gerhart 1993; Edwards 1991). In a study examining recruiter's perceptions of applicant fit, Bretz *et al.* (1993) concluded that applicants had much to gain through an understanding of the way recruiters perceive person–organization fit, given that they are 'the "gatekeeper" regulating organisational entry' (*ibid.*, p. 321).

If competency statements are primarily examples of impression management tactics, then the information they convey should be fairly general and positive. Consequently, one would not predict there to be a systematic relationship between the number of competency statements and the degree of perceived candidate–job fit (measured by the decision to short-list). Rather, these statements should serve to boost candidate ratings by providing a more general halo effect irrespective of how many are present.

Alternatively, if competency statements serve to provide extra information of a more specific nature to the reader that increases the perceived fit between the applicant and the job, the more competency statements included in the résumé, the more likely that applicant is to be short-listed.

A caveat to both of the preceding hypotheses is that these effects may be moderated by the managers' impression of the candidate's honesty. If candidates are perceived to be dishonest due in part to the number of competency statements included on their résumé, this may result in them failing to be short-listed. Whilst this argument is plausible, Bright and Davies (1999) found that managers' ratings of candidate honesty based only upon reading candidate résumés was totally independent of their short-listing decision based on the same available information. Consequently, while conceding it is possible, it is thought improbable that honesty ratings will influence the short-listing decision.

It is also not clear whether prior exposure to the required job competencies influences managers' perceptions of fit to a job for candidates who include competency statements relating to these in their résumé. That is, whether competency statements are more effective if they are seen to match the required job competencies

to some degree, compared to when they are not recognized as specifically matching the requirements of the job. For example, Knouse (1994) found that a candidate is more likely to be perceived positively and short-listed by a recruiter when their education and job experience presented in their résumé are relevant to the job. This finding is not surprising given that organizational theorists have consistently emphasized the importance of producing a high degree of fit between the individual and the job.

Heilman's (1983) lack of fit model further clarifies the use and pervasive influence of person–job fit in the selection process. Given this, her model represents a strong theoretical component in the present study. Heilman's model proposes that the perception of a poor fit between the perceived attributes of the candidate and the perceived requirements of the job leads to expectations of failure in terms of the candidate's performance in the target job. Conversely, if a good fit is perceived, this leads to expectations of success. Heilman notes that these 'performance expectations have critical consequences' (*ibid.*, p. 279) as they influence a number of decisions, including whether people are chosen for employment. Consequently, the model proposes that the presumed degree of fit between the perceived attributes of a candidate and the perceived characteristics of a target job influences a candidate's success in the selection process. In the present study it is expected that candidate résumés which are a better perceived fit in terms of competency statements to a specific job would be rated higher than résumés which do not clearly match the requirements of the job.

This can be tested by providing half of the managers reading the résumés with a set of explicit job competencies. This should encourage the manager to compare the list of required competencies with those listed on the résumé. If any systematic relationship exists between the number of competency statements on a résumé and the likelihood of short-listing, this should be seen most clearly in the group of managers given the list of job competencies.

Finally, we test the hypothesis that the location of these impression management statements will have an effect on ratings of the candidates. In particular, it has been found in employment interview research that the impact of positive information is greatest when it comes at the beginning of an interview. Dipboye (1982) has found evidence for a self-fulfilling prophecy model in the employment interview which supports the notion that initial impressions have a greater impact compared to those which are formed later. The model asserts that the behavioural biases (interviewers behaving in a manner that confirms their initial impression of

an applicant) and cognitive biases (interviewers distorting information in such a way that their initial impressions of a candidate are confirmed) act to influence a recruiter's final evaluation of a candidate. Dougherty, Turban and Callender (1994) tested Dipboye's model and concluded that there is some support for the notion that positive first impressions of applicants are followed by interviewers displaying more positive regard for applicants. We produce the analogue of this by putting the competency statements alternatively, in the cover letter, the first and the second pages of the résumé. In this way information that is presented in the cover letter, which is read first by a recruiter, compared to the same information being presented in the résumé, may be more influential in the decision to interview a candidate. In fact, Langerud (1996) emphasizes that the decision to interview an applicant is often based entirely on the impact of the cover letter. Furthermore, Biggs and Beutell (1986) and Liden and Parsons (1989) advocate that the initial impression formed when reading a résumé may be a key influencer regarding the decision to interview an applicant.

It is hypothesized that résumés will be rated higher that have competency statements located in the cover letter than résumés that have competency statements appearing in the body of the résumé.

Method

Subjects

Sixty-two recruitment consultants, human resource managers/personnel, and line managers participated voluntarily in this study. Participants who were employed in these positions were selected from the client base of a national organization of human resource professionals. People in these positions were selected as subjects as they are usually the first point of contact for a graduate when applying for a job. Subjects ranged in age from 21 to 60 years, with the average age of the sample being 38 years. Subjects had been involved in recruitment for an average of nine years, and were drawn from across four Australian capital cities. Ninety-nine packs of experimental materials were distributed to subjects. Sixty-two packs were returned resulting in a response rate of 63%.

Experimental Materials

The experimental materials used in this study were the same as those used in an earlier study conducted by Earl *et al.* (1998). A real-life job advertisement, position description and competency profile for the position of Sales

Analyst in a large pharmaceutical company, along with genuine résumés submitted for the position were used in the study. The use of genuine materials was regarded as an important part of the study to maximize ecological validity. The target job was initially chosen by Earl *et al.* because it is a position which considers graduates from a variety of academic backgrounds. In the study by Earl *et al.* 15 actual résumés that had been submitted for the position of Sales Analyst were viewed by human resource managers and psychologists in training. This was conducted to identify those résumés regarded as universally 'good' and 'poor'. The results of this study identified four résumés regarded as 'good', and four as 'poor'. The four résumés which had been identified as 'good' were used in the present study. These résumés were selected to minimize the extent to which there were perceived differences between the experimental résumés.

The four résumés selected for the present study were presented to subjects in the identical form in which they were originally submitted for the job. However, the candidate's name, age, address and gender were removed to maintain their anonymity, and ensure that these factors did not influence participants' selection decisions. Each résumé was assigned a candidate number for identification purposes. Further, the original cover letters were removed, and a standard brief cover letter was constructed and attached to each résumé. None, two, four or six competency statements were added to either the résumé or cover letter. The competency statements used were drawn from the study by Earl *et al.*, and additional ones were also developed. The competency statements drawn from, or based on those used in the study by Earl *et al.* were:

Highly motivated: I have a proven track record of achievement, both within university and outside university through extra curricular activities. I have won numerous awards throughout my academic career, but have still managed to maintain a balance with social activities.

Sales Market Knowledge: I keep in touch with the market by reading sales journals and magazines, as well as visiting supermarkets and other points of sale where products are sold. Last year I completed a research project entitled 'What makes a Supermarket tick: Best placement or best product?' which looked at the dynamics of product placement in stores and the impact on sales.

Organization Skills: As a person who is involved in many different activities, I have developed excellent organization skills to

ensure that I plan my time effectively. This enables me to achieve maximum output in minimum time, as well as handle a number of activities simultaneously.

Energetic: I am a person who is always on the go, as I am involved in a number of activities. These range from academic to work related to sporting, particularly team sports. I am an outgoing person and enjoy being an active member of numerous clubs and associations.

Competency statements constructed for the purpose of this study were:

Communication Skills: My diverse range of experiences at university, work and in extracurricular activities have enabled me to acquire strong verbal and written communication skills. As an outgoing person I have also had numerous opportunities to develop my interpersonal skills to a high level.

Responsible: As a person who has always been involved in a range of activities, I have developed a responsible and mature approach to any task that I undertake, or situation that I am presented with. I believe that these assets will stand me in good stead for any future positions that I undertake.

Experimental Design

All subjects received the job advertisement, position description, and the same four experimental résumés. Résumés were presented to subjects in a random order to eliminate possible order effects. Of the four résumés that each subject received, one contained no competency statements, one contained two, one contained four, and one contained six competency statements. The number of competency statements appearing in each résumé were completely counterbalanced, so that each résumé appeared with zero, two, four and six competency statements the same number of times as every other résumé. Counterbalancing was used to eliminate the influence of individual aspects of particular résumés (e.g., work history, education, design, etc.).

Half of the subjects received a brief description of four required job competencies derived from the job competency profile. These subjects were asked to read this description prior to rating the experimental résumés. The four brief statements related exactly to the first four competency statements that appeared in some of the résumés. That is, résumés that had four competency statements exactly fitted the job in terms of competencies. Résumés that had two competency statements matched only half the

required job competencies, while résumés that had six competency statements matched the required job competencies, as well as including two more job competency statements. Given this, where a résumé only included two competency statements, these were always the same two (highly motivated and organization skills), where four were included these were always the same four (highly motivated, organization skills, communication skills and sales market knowledge), and where six were included these were always the same six (highly motivated, organization skills, communication skills, sales market knowledge, energetic and responsible). Résumés that did not include any competency statements failed to match any of the stated required job competencies in terms of competency statements.

Finally, half of the subjects were given résumés with the competency statements located in the body of the résumé, while the other half read the same résumés with the competency statements located in the cover letter. All résumés regardless of the location of the competency statements included an attached cover letter. The design resulted in 16 different résumé combination packs, that each appeared four times. At the completion of data collection, 62 of the 64 required packs had been returned, to produce a near perfectly counterbalanced study.

The within subjects factor was the number of competency statements in the cover letter or résumé. The between subjects factors were the location of the competency statements, and exposure to a description of the required job competencies. Therefore, the study was a four (six versus four versus two versus no competency statements) \times two (exposure to the required job competencies versus no exposure to the required job competencies) \times two (competency statements located in the résumé versus competency statement located in the cover letter) experimental design.

The dependent variables are the participants' ratings of suitability for the position, the decision to interview the applicant, and the overall ranking of the résumés.

Procedure

The materials were mailed to the participants who completed them in their own time, and returned them in the enclosed reply paid envelope. Each participant was requested to read the provided job advertisement and the position description. Half the participants were provided with a description of the required job competencies to read. They were then asked to read the résumés and attached cover letters and evaluate the candidate information on the attached evaluation form.

An individual evaluation form was attached to each résumé that required participants to make a number of judgements based on the candidate information provided in each résumé. Subjects were requested to: indicate if they would interview the candidate, provide a rating of suitability (where five is 'excellent', and one is 'poor') of the candidate for the position of sales analyst, and provide ratings for ten competencies derived from the job competency profile.

Participants were requested to complete a global evaluation form once they had completed the individual evaluation form attached to each résumé. This requested that they make a number of judgements comparing the four résumés they saw. Specifically, they were asked to: rank order the four résumés (where one is the best, and four is the worst candidate), and to indicate what they most liked about the candidate they ranked highest, and the concerns they had with their least preferred candidate, rank the ten competencies from the previous section according to their importance for the job, and indicate what they most liked about the two ranked highest, and their concerns with the two competencies ranked lowest.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

The effect of zero, two, four and six competency statements were compared for the four different résumés. Ratings given to résumés were compared for subjects who had prior exposure to the required job competencies, and those who did not. The effect of the location of competency statements (cover letter versus résumé) on ratings given to résumés was also analysed. The data was analysed using a polynomial repeated measures analysis of variance. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

The ANOVA compared the participants' ratings of the suitability of the candidate, the decision to interview and the overall rankings for the four experimental résumés. The means for each of these measures are shown in Table 1.

The means in Table 1 indicate that there are differences in the ratings given to résumés when competency statements are included. The ANOVA revealed that there was a significant main effect of competency statements on suitability ratings, $F(3, 174) = 4.72, p < .01$, decision to interview, $F(3, 174) = 3.65, p < .05$, and overall ranking, $F(3, 174) = 6.72, p < .001$.

Six paired samples t-tests compared each level of competency statements that were included (zero, two, four and six) with every other level. These t-tests were performed to attempt to ascertain the number of competency statements required to improve significantly the ratings given to résumés. A Bonferroni adjustment was also performed to counteract the family-wise error rate resulting from multiple analyses on the same data. Given this adjustment the new significance level for the results of the t-tests is .008.

The results of the t-test indicate that there was a significant difference between résumés without competency statements and those with six competency statements, for suitability, $t(61) = -3.43, p < .001$, decision to interview, $t(61) = 3.42, p < .001$ and ranking, $t(61) = 4.15, p < .001$. Every other comparison, including the difference between résumés with two, four and six competency statements was non-significant at the $p < .008$ level of significance. Prior to the Bonferroni adjustment there was a significant difference between résumés with zero and résumés with two or four competency statements, for suitability ($p < .05$) and ranking ($p < .01$), and between résumés with none and two competency statements for decision to interview ($p < .05$).

The Effect of Prior Exposure to the Required Job Competencies on Résumé Ratings

The ANOVA revealed that prior exposure to the required job competencies did not have a significant main effect on suitability of the candidate, $F(1, 58) = .54, p > .05$, decision to interview, $F(1, 58) = 1.43, p > .05$, and overall ranking, $F(1, 58) = .00, p > .05$.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations (SD): none, two, four and six competency statements in résumés

Competency statements	Suitability*		Interview**		Ranking***	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
None	2.79	.96	1.45	.51	3.08	1.06
Two	3.16	.91	1.29	.46	2.45	1.10
Four	3.19	.97	1.27	.45	2.34	1.01
Six	3.40	.91	1.18	.39	2.13	1.11

Notes: * where 1 is the least suitable, and 5 is the most suitable

** where 1 = yes, and 2 = no

*** where 1 is the highest ranking and 4 is the lowest ranking

Table 2: Comparison of mean résumé ratings and standard deviations (SD) for participants exposed versus not exposed to the required job competencies

Competency statements	Exposure to job competencies	Suitability*		Interview**		Ranking***	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
None	ü	2.68	1.01	1.45	.51	2.97	1.05
	×	2.90	.91	1.45	.51	3.19	1.08
Two	ü	3.26	.82	1.29	.46	2.29	1.16
	×	3.06	1.00	1.29	.46	2.61	1.02
Four	ü	3.10	.98	1.35	.49	2.52	1.09
	×	3.29	.97	1.19	.40	2.16	.90
Six	ü	3.32	.98	1.23	.43	2.23	1.09
	×	3.48	.85	1.13	.34	2.03	1.14

Notes: * where 1 is the least suitable, and 5 is the most suitable

** where 1 = yes, and 2 = no

*** where 1 is the highest ranking and 4 is the lowest ranking

Table 2 shows the mean ratings given to résumés by participants who had prior exposure to the required job competencies and those that did not. There were no significant interactions between prior exposure to the required job competencies and suitability of the candidate, $F(3, 174) = .71, p > .05$, decision to interview, $F(3, 174) = .42, p > .05$, and overall ranking, $F(3, 174) = 1.02, p > .05$.

The Effect of Location of Competency Statements on Ratings of Résumés

The ANOVA revealed that the location (cover letter versus résumé) of the competency statements did not have a significant main effect on suitability of the candidate, $F(1, 58) = .23, p > .05$, decision to interview, $F(1, 58) = .11, p > .05$, and overall ranking, $F(1, 58) = .00, p > .05$. Table 3 shows the mean ratings given to résumés where competency statements were located in the cover letter compared to the résumé.

There were no significant interactions between location of the competency statements and suitability of the candidate, $F(3, 174) = .81, p > .05$, decision to interview, $F(3, 174) = .40, p > .05$, and overall ranking, $F(3, 174) = 1.16, p > .05$. Further, there were no significant interactions between exposure to the required job competencies and the location of the competency statements regarding suitability of the candidate, $F(1, 58) = 1.71, p > .05$, decision to interview, $F(1, 58) = .06, p > .05$, and overall ranking, $F(1, 58) = .00, p > .05$.

The Impact of Competency Statements on Competency Ratings

In addition to providing the above ratings, participants were requested to rate each résumé on ten individual competencies, and then to rank order these competencies from most to least valued in regard to the position of sales analyst. Means were generated from these responses to

Table 3: Comparison of mean résumé ratings and standard deviations (SD): cover letter versus résumé

Competency statements	Location	Suitability*		Interview**		Ranking***	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
None	Cover letter	2.68	.98	1.48	.51	3.29	.82
	Résumé	2.90	.94	1.42	.50	2.87	1.23
Two	Cover letter	3.19	.79	1.32	.48	2.48	1.15
	Résumé	3.13	1.02	1.26	.44	2.42	1.06
Four	Cover letter	3.32	.83	1.23	.43	2.13	.99
	Résumé	3.06	1.09	1.32	.48	2.55	.99
Six	Cover letter	3.48	.85	1.19	.40	2.10	1.11
	Résumé	3.32	.98	1.16	.37	2.16	1.13

Notes: * where 1 is the least suitable, and 5 is the most suitable

** where 1 = yes, and 2 = no

*** where 1 is the highest ranking and 4 is the lowest ranking

Table 4: Competencies: mean rankings and standard deviations

Competency	Mean ranking	Standard Deviation
Communication Skills	3.15	2.04
Initiative/Responsibility	4.30	2.25
Planning/Organizing	4.46	2.74
Numerical Skills	4.75	2.97
Achievement Orientation	5.31	2.73
Problem Solving	5.74	2.46
Motivation	5.77	2.63
Market Knowledge	6.79	2.90
Energy	7.05	2.46
Tenacity	7.70	2.38

Note: $n = 61$

identify the five most important competencies (see Table 4).

With regard to the five competencies the most frequently identified reason why each was highly valued was identified (see Table 5).

With regard to the five competencies that were ranked as least valued, the most frequently cited reason for this for each competency was also identified. Motivation, energy and tenacity were all considered to be subsumed by the other competencies, while problem solving and market knowledge were both identified as being less important because they are considered to be skills that can be acquired on the job.

Repeated measures ANOVAs performed on the top five competencies revealed that there was a significant main effect of competency statements on ratings of communication skills, $F(3, 117) = 4.54$, $p < .01$, and initiative and responsibility, $F(3, 108) = 3.34$, $p < .05$.

However, there were no significant differences between ratings given to résumés in terms of planning and organizing, $F(3, 93) = 1.72$, $p > .05$, numerical skills, $F(3, 54) = 1.64$, $p > .05$, and achievement orientation, $F(3, 126) = 1.78$, $p > .05$. Table 6 provides mean ratings for the top five competencies with none, two, four and six competency statements.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis was conducted by an independent rater to determine what was most liked about the résumé participants ranked

highest, and what was liked least regarding the résumé they ranked lowest.

The top three factors for résumés liked most were:

1. Relevant experience.
2. Easy to read layout, excellent presentation.
3. Appropriate/good qualifications.

The frequencies for each identified factor are presented in Figure 1.

The top three concerns of résumés liked least were:

1. Lacked experience or irrelevant experience.
2. Poor format, difficult to read.
3. Lacked information, too brief.

The frequencies for each identified factor are presented in Figure 2.

The third concern was closely followed by a lack of achievement orientation, and a poor cover letter. Figures 1 and 2 highlight that résumés with competency statements were more often associated with positive than negative factors.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine the effects of the inclusion of competency statements, prior exposure to the required job competencies and the location of the competency statements on résumé ratings.

The results of the present research indicate that the inclusion of competency statements in a

Table 5: The top five identified competencies

Competency	Reason valued	Frequency
Communication Skills	The ability to liaise with internal and external people	16
Initiative/Responsibility	The ability to work unsupervised and think for yourself	9
Planning/Organizing	The ability to collate and organize information	9
Numerical Skills	A requirement of the job (Sales Analyst)	21
Achievement Orientation	To achieve results and future success	10

Table 6: Mean ratings for top five competencies

Competency	Number of competency statements			
	None	Two	Four	Six
Communication Skills	3.24	3.53	3.74	3.76
Initiative/Responsibility	3.54	3.71	3.78	3.96
Planning/Organizing	3.53	3.67	3.76	3.76
Numerical Skills	3.72	4.00	3.73	3.72
Achievement Orientation	3.53	3.89	3.79	3.81

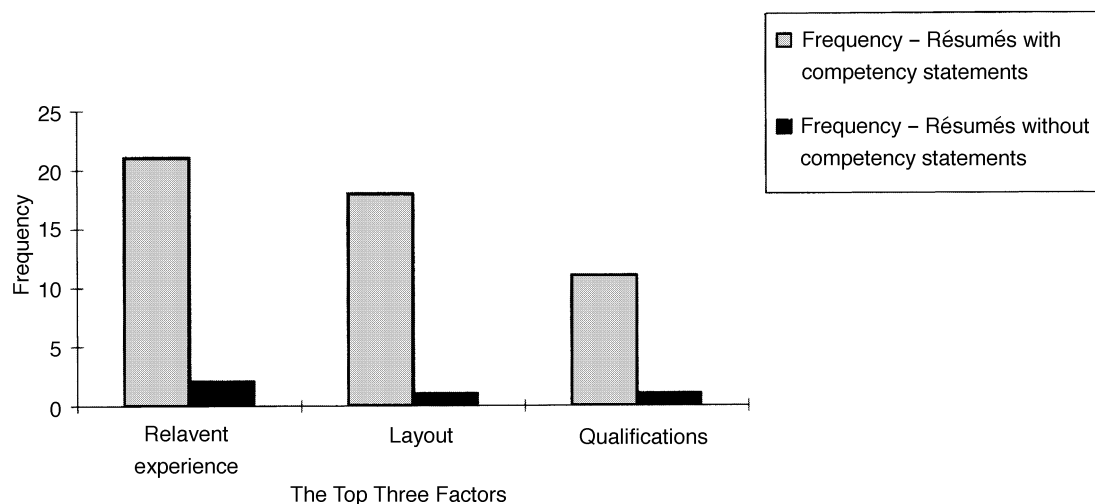


Figure 1: Frequencies for the top three factors of résumés liked most.

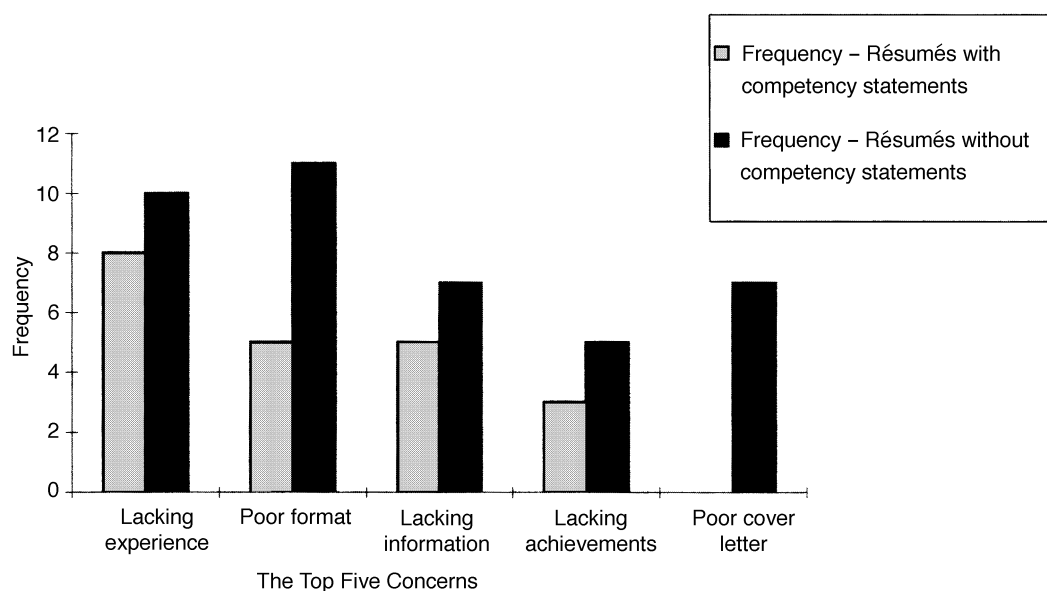


Figure 2: Frequencies for the top five concerns of résumés liked least.

résumé significantly improved the applicant's perceived suitability for the job, their overall ranking compared to other applicants, and the likelihood that they would be short-listed for an interview. This finding provides support for the hypothesis that résumés with competency statements would be rated higher than those without. This finding is also consistent with previous research by Knouse (1994), Bright *et al.* (1997) and Earl *et al.* (1998) who all found that impression management or competency statements in a résumé enhanced the reader's perception of the candidate. The comparison of résumés that included competency statements (two or four or six) revealed there was a non-significant difference between these résumés. This result suggests that the number of competency statements in a résumé (between two and six) is not important, rather, it is their inclusion to some degree which is necessary to improve the overall perceptions of a candidate.

This result would seem to indicate that competency statements have a non-specific positive impact upon recruiters' perceptions of the candidate. Moreover, these results indicate that successively adding more competency statements to the experimental résumés did not at any point begin to negatively affect the overall perception of the candidate. It does not appear that these competency statements improve the degree of perceived fit between the applicant and the job, despite their being explicitly targeted at job competencies.

Looking at the content of these competency statements, all of them included vague generalities that are not easily verifiable (e.g. 'I have developed excellent organization skills ...'). We have argued that such vague statements are consistent with Gardner and Matinko's (1988) concept of impression management tactics. Two of the competencies – highly motivated and sales market knowledge – also contained some unambiguous, more specific and verifiable information (e.g. 'I have won numerous awards throughout my academic career' and 'I completed a research project entitled ...'). The market knowledge statement appeared on all résumés that included competency statements and the motivation statement appeared on all résumés containing four or more competency statements. One might expect this extra information contained in these statements to have a specific impact on the ratings. However, there is no significant difference in ratings given to résumés containing two statements (including one 'verifiable' statement) and résumés containing four statements (including two 'verifiable' statements).

Furthermore, the results suggest that participants who were exposed to a brief description of the required job competencies, relating to the

first four competency statements, did not rate résumés significantly differently than participants who were not exposed to this. This result does not support the hypothesis that alerting recruiters to the match of competency statements on the résumé to a list of job competencies will increase the likelihood that résumés with good perceived fit will be judged more positively. It would appear that competency statements are not used as a dimension of fit.

This finding is perhaps surprising given the extensive and consistent nature of previous research, which purports that applicant fit is central to the selection process (Bretz *et al.* 1993; Caldwell and O'Reilly 1990). In fact, Heilman's lack of fit model proposes that the greater the presumed degree of fit between the perceived attributes of a candidate and the perceived characteristics of a target job, the greater the candidate's success in the selection process. Although résumés with four competency statements (which fit the job exactly in terms of the required job competencies) were rated higher than those no such statements, this result was consistent regardless of whether or not the participant was exposed to a brief description of the required job competencies.

An explanation for this result may involve the fact that applicant fit was only manipulated in terms of the required job competencies, rather than more pervasive factors which are likely to be used as a means to judge applicant fit. Knouse (1994) found that relevant education and experience listed in the résumé were key components in how positively a candidate was perceived by the reader. Accordingly, it is likely in the present study that participants predominantly judged applicant fit according to these factors, whose requirements were specified in the position description received by all participants. Thus, the description of the required job competencies received by half the participants may have been regarded as less important when judging the suitability of the résumés, in comparison to education and experience.

Furthermore, the competency statements used in the present study may have been regarded as relevant to the job, regardless of whether the participant received a description of the required job competencies that related to these. That is, statements relating to qualities such as motivation, organization and communication skills may be regarded as generic assets for many jobs.

Manipulating the competency statements rather than the job information given to the participants may help us better understand the role of competency statements tailored to the job, and competency statements completely

irrelevant to the job. Further research of this nature may help to clarify whether competency statements are more effective if they relate to the specific requirements of the job and contain easily verifiable facts rather than self-opinions.

The results also provide no strong evidence of a primacy effect, in that competency statements are no more effective when they are located in the cover letter as opposed to the body of the résumé. This is inconsistent with prior research that has consistently supported the existence of the primacy effect. Langerud (1996) noted that the decision to interview an applicant is often based entirely on the impact of the cover letter. According to Anderson and Barrios (1961) and Rowe (1967), the characteristics of the person which are presented first will have a greater impact on the overall impression than those which are presented later. Given this, one may have expected that a cover letter with competency statements would result in a stronger overall impression of the candidate. A key difference between our study and previous work is that our readers had more control over the order in which the candidate information is presented to them. Readers could go back and re-read different sections of the résumés, and so on. In face-to-face interviews, it is harder to skip back and forth presenting and re-presenting the same information, even for skilled interviewers. If readers were skipping over material or reading material out of order, this would weaken our manipulation of the location of competency statements, and this relative freedom of the reader may reduce the impact of ordering effects generally.

The implication of this finding for candidates preparing cover letters and résumés is that beyond the inclusion of competency statements, the location of the competency statements appears not to impact their effectiveness. Moreover, the results indicate that candidates who have a brief cover letter and include competency statements in their résumé are unlikely to be perceived as significantly more or less suitable for a job, than candidates who have a cover letter which includes competency statements.

The results indicated that competency statements have a varying influence on ratings of the various competencies. The inclusion of competency statements in a résumé significantly improved the reader's perception of the applicant's communication skills and their ability to demonstrate initiative and responsibility. These results provide further support for hypothesis one, and are consistent with previous research by Earl *et al.*, who found that the inclusion of competency statements in a résumé significantly improved ratings given to the résumé on a number of individual competencies.

These findings are not surprising given that these competencies relate to two of the competency statements (communication skills and initiative and responsibility) that were included in some of the résumés. Furthermore, the inclusion of competency statements provides applicants with an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to write fluently, and communicate their ideas effectively. This may help explain why competency statements were associated with significantly higher ratings for communication skills. The inclusion of competency statements also enables applicants to attempt to sell themselves and impress their reader, through the inclusion of extra information beyond standard candidate data such as education and work history. This extra effort may be interpreted as the demonstration of initiative, which may explain why competency statements were associated with significantly higher ratings on this measure.

In contrast, the inclusion of competency statements in the résumés did not significantly improve ratings on the competencies, planning and organizing, numerical skills or achievement orientation. However, there appears to be a trend in the general direction. This lends some support to the notion that competency statements in a résumé improve the overall impression of the candidate.

The results of the qualitative analysis also support the finding that competency statements significantly improved the reader's impression of the résumés. The top three reasons provided for the most liked résumés were related predominantly to those that included competency statements. Furthermore, the concerns provided for résumés that were least liked were more frequently associated with those that did not include competency statements than those that did. Moreover, the same résumés were evaluated differently on the same or similar attributes depending on whether or not they had competency statements included. For example, the format of the same résumé was regarded unfavourably when competency statements were not included, and favourably when they were.

These results indicate that competency statements improved the ratings given to résumés, because recruiters extrapolated this extra information as evidence of other attributes, such as relevant job experience. Further, competency statements improved the reader's general impression of the résumé, such that more superficial factors like layout and design were also positively influenced. This is consistent with the findings of Earl *et al.* (1998) and Knouse (1994) who note that recruiters make attributions about a candidate based on the information in their résumé.

Further empirical, theory-driven research is required to address a number of remaining questions in this area. These involve further examination regarding the point at which the number of competency statements outweighs their effectiveness. Investigation is also required regarding the effectiveness of competency statements that relate to the requirements of the job compared to those which do not. Finally, given that the finding regarding the location of competency statements is inconsistent with previous research concerning the primacy effect, further investigation is required to clarify this.

Overall, the results of the present study indicate that the inclusion of competency in a résumé or cover letter significantly improve the reader's impression of a candidate. However, whether these statements are located in the cover letter or the body of the résumé is unlikely to significantly affect the recruiter's impression of the candidate. Further, the results suggest that prior exposure to the required job competencies relating to the competency statements does not affect their capacity to influence recruiters. These findings have practical implications for the selection decisions of recruiters by alerting them to the potential influence of impression management in the résumé, as well as the future success of job seekers.

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