

Impression management throughout the professional life

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Summary of the Dissertation

The impressions we make on other people are important in every-day life, and especially in professional life. Throughout the professional life, individuals are constantly evaluated by others. The targets of IM are typically influential others, like e.g. supervisors higher up in the hierarchy (Rao, Schmidt, & Murray, 1995). Therefore, individuals, during professional lives, constantly try to manage their own impressions, hoping to receive favorable assessments as a result. This phenomenon is referred to as impression management (IM), defined as the process whereby individuals seek to influence the image other people have of them (Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995).

The dissertation at hand investigated IM during three distinct contexts across an individual's professional life, by also moving away from the mere motivation for IM – that is to solely increase performance evaluations received. The first empirical study looked at a job interview context, and examined how applicants' engagement in IM during a job interview affected interviewer evaluations of the respective applicant. The second empirical study investigated an organizational context, and examined the effect that perceived threat appraisal as a result of work changes had on individual IM use at work. The third empirical study originated from an educational context and examined the extent to which individuals throughout the progression of an academic course at university used increasingly more IM over time with decreasing temporal distance to the performance appraisal event.

With the three contexts studied, the dissertation added to previous IM research in three ways: First, IM research in the job interview context, until today, mainly looked at the effect of structural formats of the job interview, such as interview structure (Tsai, Chen, & Chiu, 2005), and length (Peeters & Lievens, 2006), and the use of multiple assessors (Ellis, West, Ryan, & DeShon, 2004). At the same time, knowledge on the effect of less structural and seemingly more trivial contingency factors during the job interview is missing. Second, the majority of past IM research in the context of work took a retention of the actual job, including currently held job features, as a given. Next to the aim to boost performance evaluations received, employees at the workplace might also decide to engage in IM behaviors to retain current job features at stake in the near future (Fugate et al., 2012). This motivation is also referred to as job-preservation motivation (Shoss, 2017). Third, scholars, up to today, considered IM as behavior that fluctuates between, and not necessarily between, persons. As a result, only a very small amount of research examined the effect that individual IM use has over time, i.e. from a longitudinal perspective (Bolino, Klotz, & Daniels, 2014; Wayne & Liden, 1995), yet all focusing on subordinates' (repeated) IM use and the effect on supervisor evaluations over time.

The first empirical study of the dissertation examined two forms of self-promotion (i.e., direct/concrete and indirect/abstract) used by the applicant during the job interview in interaction with spatial distance (close and far) on subsequent performance evaluations by the interviewer. Originated on construal level theory (CLT), direct/concrete self-promotion was evaluated more favorably with a close spatial distance

and indirect/abstract self-promotion was evaluated more favorably with a large spatial distance between the applicant and interviewer. The findings point to a trivial contingency, affecting the favorableness of final assessments made and hence the chance of being hired for a vacant job position. Based on the study's results, several interventions follow on the level of the interviewer and the organization as a whole. First of all, trainings with the intention to train interviewers in their abilities to identify possible selection biases (e.g., an analysis of the interview room) during the interview, seems an obvious starting point. Above that, interviewers should receive training on how to use unambiguous interview techniques, that is by focusing on detailed and experience-based questions (i.e., asking about previous job experiences) rather than situational questions (i.e., asking about an imaginary job-relevant situation). At the same time, also organizational interventions such as overall standardizations of job interview processes, e.g. using multiple assessors who take different spatial distances in the interview room, and who need to come up to one, unanimous decision, provide a meaningful avenue.

The second empirical study investigated IM at work, and more specifically in the context of employees' job threat appraisal, triggered by changes in work processes, practices, and routines. In line with conservation of resources theory (CoR) the results showed that appraised job threat triggered subsequent exemplification use by the employee, in an attempt to retain current resources at stake. This relationship was found to be contingent on the extent to which the individual felt in control of work processes and practices (i.e., job control) and on the person's own pre-dispositional state aimed at influencing the environment (i.e., proactivity). Individuals high in both job control and proactivity were thus most likely to engage in exemplification. The study's results highlight the responsibilities organizations have when undergoing changes in work processes, practices, and routines. Organizations, on the one hand, need to communicate how current work processes and practices are affected and, on the other hand, what employees can do to become an active part in this process. With reference to the second contingency factor, i.e. personal control, organizations can help employees to cope with changes at the workplace, by developing their general tendencies to engage in behaviors to affect future change outcomes, that is by increasing their proactivity.

The third empirical chapter looked at IM in an educational context and postulated that individual IM use is likely to increase with decreasing temporal distance to the performance appraisal event. As appraisal events come closer in time, individual goals (i.e., the desirability of achieving a good outcome) and values (i.e., the importance of achieving a good outcome) increase. Based on premises of behavioral plasticity theory (BPT), a dynamic element was added, finding support for the idea that individuals with low rather than high self-esteem engaged in more ingratiation behaviors as the performance appraisal approached. One concrete intervention following from the study's results is to establish an active feedback climate, i.e. through regular performance appraisal meetings instead of focusing on once or twice-a-year performance appraisal meetings. In doing so, organizations can reduce the stake associated with performance

appraisal meetings. Above that, organizations should try to create a climate allowing employees to develop individual levels of self-esteem, hence reducing the necessity for individuals to engage in IM.

The dissertation has shown that individuals do not only engage in IM in different contexts throughout their professional lives but also across time. By applying a number of different theories, the dissertation has shown that threat is a prevailing factor during professional life which can take on different facets and forms, including performance-related aspects but also more general aspects such as job features at stake. The dissertation also revealed the effect that different forms of psychological distance, such as spatial and temporal distance, can have on individual IM use on the one hand and IM effectiveness as rated by its targets on the other hand.