

# Impression management throughout the professional life

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# Valorization Addendum



## Relevance

During every-day life, and more particularly professional life, individuals constantly try to manage impressions because individuals are constantly appraised by others. The strategic use of behaviors to influence the image others have of someone is called impression management (IM) (Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995). Targets of IM are typically influential others (i.e., supervisors) higher up the hierarchy (Rao, Schmidt, & Murray, 1995). At the same time, the use of IM already starts before the actual performance appraisal evaluation – that is before the focal, high-stake event – and can go beyond the attempt to favorably influence supervisor evaluations. In this vein, individuals may also engage in IM to deal with threats at the workplace, such as the prevention of potential job feature loss from occurring in the near future.

We, as human beings, share some kind of value system, that is, a list of commonly accepted positive and negative personal values. Examples of positive values are, among others, to be a skillful, competent or likeable person. Examples of negative values are to be a lazy, stubborn or lonely person. Originated on the positive values mentioned (i.e., being skillful, competent or likeable), it is not surprising that one often-researched, high-stake context throughout the professional life is personnel selection, and more precisely the job interview (Bolino, Kacmar, Gilstrap, & Turnley, 2008). This dissertation departed from the context of the job interview, and demonstrated that IM effectiveness, next to more structural formats of the interview, also depends on seemingly more trivial aspects of the job interview like the spatial distance between the interviewee and interviewer. The dissertation moved on by demonstrating that IM is, in fact, used in many more contexts and for different purposes than to boost subsequent performance evaluations received, e.g. as an employee at the workplace to counteract potential future job feature loss. Lastly, the dissertation took a longitudinal view and showed that individuals already start to engage in IM long before the actual high-stake event (i.e., the performance appraisal) takes place.

The findings show that engaging in IM behaviors throughout an individual's professional life does not only affect subsequent hiring chances and performance evaluations but also organizations and individuals more widely. For instance, IM use impacts how individuals deal with different types of job threats as a result of changes in work processes, practices, and routines, helping individuals to preserve resources at stake. IM use can therefore also improve overall employee well-being at the workplace and to reach attained professional goals. On the other hand, IM use can also impact overall organizational functioning by influencing how employees deal with both performance appraisal events and organizational work changes.

## Target Groups

The findings of this dissertation are valuable to recruiters, organizations, and individuals using IM, next to the academic community for whom this work is clearly valuable. For recruiters, IM use is connected to both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, IM use helps recruiters to identify who is fit for the job and who is not. However, the use of IM also comes along with downsides. In this vein, using IM tactics during the job interview increases the chance of selection biases, that is hiring a candidate who eventually turns out to be suboptimal for the job. IM use also affects organizations during later stages – that is when used by employees at the workplace, to reduce feelings of job threat due to job features at stake. When undergoing changes in work routines, processes, and practices, organizations need to clearly communicate these changes, so that employees feel that they can be an active part in this process. For the individuals themselves, using IM can help to achieve attained goals and to get remedy by trying to retain current resources at stake and trying to actively influence future outcomes. Next to these target groups (i.e., organizations, recruiters, and individuals), the findings of IM research are also relevant for career coaches, and personal coaches. For instance, career coaches can use insights from IM research to simulate fictive job interviews and to prepare their clients for an effective job interview, thereby maximizing the chances of being hired for the job position. Personality coaches can use insights from the current dissertation to help individuals with personal development and in dealing with challenges related to work life (i.e., that is developing individual skills and work strategies to reach professional as well as personal goals).

## Implications

Professional life is exposed to a variety of situations, in which creating a favorable impression is highly important. This part will focus on the most significant target groups, that is organizations, recruiters, and individuals using IM.

IM, first of all, has consequences for the organization as a whole, including overall organizational functioning (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1991). One has to do with the standardization of interview procedures, including fixed interview formats, such as the presence of multiple assessors and the standardization of psychological distance (i.e., including but not limited to spatial distance) across the interview room. The dissertation has shown that seemingly trivial aspects such as the spatial distance between the interviewer and interviewee can have important consequences for who will be hired for a vacant job position. At the same time, the dissertation has shown that IM use is not only associated with risks for organizations during job interviews but also during later stages, that is, when used as an employee at the workplace. IM is typically used by employees at the workplace to affect future outcomes at stake (i.e., different job resources such as

task responsibilities, general working conditions, as well as future job stability). In order to preclude employees from using too much IM at the workplace, it is important that firms clearly communicate current organizational work changes, and openly articulate if and what extent employees can take an active part in this process.

For recruiters, IM use is connected to both opportunities and risks (Weiss & Feldman, 2006). On the one hand, IM use helps recruiters to identify who is fit for the job and who is not. However, the use of IM also comes along with downsides. That being said, using IM tactics during the job interview increases the chance of selection biases to occur. In doing so, the possibility of hiring a candidate who eventually appears to be suboptimal for the vacant job position in terms of required skills and competences increases. In order to circumvent or at least minimize the risks associated with selection biases, interviewers need to be able to identify the risks of possible selection biases during the job interview. In doing so, interviewers need to clearly observe the interview room and possible differences that exist between interview rooms. Above that, interviewers need to be able to identify whether IM, and more specifically, self-promotion tactics originate from the applicants themselves (i.e., low abstractness) and/or from linkages to successful others (i.e., high abstractness).

Finally, IM has consequences for the individuals using it (i.e., the senders). As outlined in the introductory part, individuals typically engage in IM behaviors because they want to achieve a desired image, such as being skillful or competent, e.g. during the job interview (Barrick, Shaffer, & DeGrassi, 2009). At the same time, the achievement of desired images goes far beyond the job interview context and also depends on individual characteristics of the person using it. Especially for individuals who doubt their own capabilities (i.e., who are low in self-esteem), engaging in IM can help to achieve desired images in others. This, in turn, helps individuals to foster and develop their own individual levels of self-esteem. Another situation prone for individuals to engage in IM are contexts, in which individuals are surrounded by unstable working conditions (i.e., characterized by changes in work processes, practices, and routines). Once job features are likely to change in the future, engaging in IM can mean remedy, such that using IM not only means a way to retain current resources at stake but can also be a way to actively influence future outcomes.

## **Innovative Activities**

The results of the current dissertation have shown that IM is not only used across different work contexts and for different motivational purposes, next to increasing performance evaluations received, but that IM is already used long before the actual high-stake (i.e., performance appraisal) event takes place.

The dissertation departed from the context of job interviews and has demonstrated that spatial distance between the interviewer and interviewee impacts subsequent

hiring decisions. As a consequence, one concrete intervention focuses on the standardization of interview procedures. One possible approach to achieve this is to first have a virtual interview for all candidates and only then invite interviewees for an on-site interview to the office. Another concrete solution is to establish a fixed committee of interview judges, who need to come up with one, unanimous decision, thereby cancelling out the effect of seemingly trivial aspects like the spatial distance to affect final interview outcomes.

Another starting point for possible interventions originates from training recruiters. Especially for on-site interviews (i.e., in interview rooms at the office), recruiters need to analyze the detailed setting of the interview room(s) used, potential differences, as well as the spatial separation between the interviewer and applicant therein. Furthermore, interviewers should receive trainings developing their ability to identify to what extent self-promotion tactics originate from the applicants themselves (i.e., low abstractness) and/or from linkages to successful others (i.e., high abstractness). This could, for instance, be practiced through simulated job interviews with the intention of practicing how to formulate unambiguous and precise interview questions, including posing 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).

IM has also been shown to affect organizations at later stages, that is when working at the organization as an employee, as employees may decide to engage in IM to preserve current job resources at stake. One concrete organizational intervention therefore pertains to fostering a transparent communication system, as this is especially meaningful to reduce employees' feelings of threat connected to changing work processes, practices, and routines. Another way to decrease perceived job threats of employees is to train individuals in their general beliefs and ability to affect future change outcomes by developing a sense of proactivity and self-esteem in employees, subsequently decreasing the necessity to use IM at the workplace. Concrete interventions to achieve this are mentorships, specifically targeted at individuals low on proactivity and self-esteem, and the creation of a regular feedback climate (i.e., including more regular and frequent performance appraisal meetings), taking away employees' perceived stake associated with performance appraisal events.

Finally, IM has implications for the individuals using IM themselves. This dissertation has shown that individuals use IM to retain current resources at stake, e.g. due to changes in work processes, practices, and routines. In particular, individuals who feel in control of organizational processes and practices (i.e., are high in job control) and who are highly proactive (i.e., are high in personal control) make more use of IM behaviors. Likewise, individuals low on self-esteem also use IM to gain security at the workplace. Although IM use can have positive effects for individuals to achieve professional goals, individuals should not alone trust in IM behaviors to achieve professional goals, but should simultaneously look out for more productive workplace behaviors, such as the engagement in speaking-up (e.g., voice) behaviors. By raising voice, employees can

bring in constructive suggestions what organizations can do to reduce insecurity at the workplace, to improve communication during times of organizational work changes, and to make employees an active part in this process.

## **Planning and Realization**

The findings of the dissertation can be traced by means of different monitorings. First, organizations, and personnel selection departments, in particular, can implement a yearly monitoring system to evaluate past years' hiring decisions and the quality of hired candidates. Indicators of high-quality decisions incorporate, but are not limited to, the hired candidate's overall performance (i.e., including total revenues generated), work presence and absenteeism, as well as turnover (intentions). Moreover, recruiters, in particular, should be briefed with respect to their perceived effectiveness of hiring decisions, including the identification of talented and suitable candidates. By reflecting on the effectiveness of current hiring processes, the necessity of required future job interview trainings connected to personnel selection can be identified.

Another measurement pertains to a yearly (or bi-yearly) monitor of organizational functioning, including organizational communication. Especially departments characterized by recent work changes including changes in work processes, practices, and routines, greatly benefit from such measures to keep track of how employees feel throughout the change process. These monitors should involve feelings and attitudes of the management direction on the one hand and feelings and attitudes of individual employees on the other. In terms of employees' feelings and attitudes, feedback on the perceived necessity to engage in behaviors such as IM as a remedy to deal with urgent job threats, serves as one indication of how the organization's communication structure is currently working.

A third realization plan for organizations is the implementation of a more active feedback climate, including more frequent performance evaluation meetings, than the nowadays common once or bi-yearly supervisor meetings. Employees worry about performance appraisal events long in advance, given that these meetings also affect opportunities for future promotions. As a result, individuals are likely to engage in behaviors such as IM already long before the actual appraisal event is taking place. The implementation of a more open feedback climate, and the execution of more regular and frequent (e.g., quarterly) performance appraisals help to reduce the stake of these events; hence also reducing the motivation to engage in behaviors like IM to increase subsequent performance appraisals received.