Building Relationships through Trust:  
A New Perspective on the Psychological Process of Recruitment

Chongwei Wang  
Department of Management and Human Resources  
Fisher College of Business  
The Ohio State University  
2100 Neil Avenue  
700 Fisher Hall  
Columbus, OH 43210-1144  
Voice: (614) 292-5317  
Fax: (614) 292-7062  
Email: wang.619@osu.edu

Jill E. Ellingson  
Department of Management and Human Resources  
Fisher College of Business  
The Ohio State University  
2100 Neil Avenue  
700 Fisher Hall  
Columbus, OH 43210-1144  
Voice: (614) 292-4585  
Fax: (614) 292-7062  
Email: ellingson@cob.osu.edu

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Abstract

Recognizing the need for theoretical contributions to recruitment research, this paper proposes a framework that models the importance of considering trust dynamics in recruitment. We examine the recruiting process from a relational perspective. Specifically, we identify the organizational characteristics that may influence applicants’ trust in the organization and its recruiters throughout the recruitment process. In turn, applicant trust levels are then hypothesized to impact important recruiting outcomes such as applicant retention and job offer acceptance.
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Acquiring and retaining top talent is critical to organizations seeking to maintain a competitive advantage. As a key human resources function, recruitment has the primary purpose of identifying and attracting potential employees to a particular organization (Barber, 1998; Rynes & Barber, 1990). Recruitment influences an organization's competitive advantage by targeting individuals with unique skills and providing the mechanism by which those skills may be realized in the organization. Further, recruitment can impact individuals by providing those opportunities necessary for career pursuit and the realization of personal rewards.

Recruitment research has traditionally focused on how to identify, attract, and hire qualified applicants (Rynes, 1991; Rynes & Barber, 1990). Because this perspective concentrates on satisfying the organization’s interests, it reflects an *instrumental* perspective. It can be argued, however, that this perspective fails to adequately describe the complexity and richness of actual recruiting experiences (e.g., Barber, 1998; Breaugh & Starke, 2000; Rynes, 1991). For example, research on applicant attraction has generally considered the impact of such factors as compensation, work conditions, and geographic location (e.g., Turban, Forret, & Hendrickson, 1998). However, applicants may also feel attracted to an organization and develop an attachment to an organization because they feel connected to that organization in a meaningful way (March & Simon, 1958). Applicants are more likely to choose to work in, and less likely to leave, an organization when they have developed an emotional link to individuals within that organization and the local community (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001). Hence, those organizations that engage in relationship building with their applicants should enjoy enhanced attraction perceptions because the organization is recognizing and responding to them in an
interpersonal manner. We believe more research is needed that investigates these *relational*
aspects of the recruitment process.

The recruiting process is fundamentally an interpersonal interaction that plays out
between an applicant and an organization (Herriot, 2002; Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). The applicant
is seeking an employment relationship that will fulfill personal expectations, in turn the
organization is attempting to identify whether the applicant is qualified and if so, whether that
applicant may be persuaded to pursue an employment relationship (Barber, 1998). Regardless of
the outcome, the two parties engage in an interpersonal exchange for the purpose of exploring a
mutually-beneficial relationship (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Trust is a fundamental element
of interpersonal relationships. It has been recognized as exerting a basic influence in a variety of
social interactions ranging from interpersonal interactions to inter-organizational interactions
(Cummings & Bromiley, 1996). Interpersonal relationships that are formed in full or in part on
the basis of trust are more open, more stable, and more cooperative (Deutsch, 1958; Dirks &
Ferrin, 2001). Yet, even though trust has been viewed as an important concept for understanding
interpersonal interactions (Kramer, Hanna, Su, & Wei, 2001), it has not been systematically
examined in recruitment settings. Thus, we propose that trust may serve as a promising construct
for enhancing our knowledge of recruitment.

Successful recruiting likely requires the establishment of a cooperative interpersonal
relationship between the applicant and the organization. Since the beginning of any relationship
sets the tone for future interaction, the formation of a trust-based relationship should have a
positive impact on new hire attitudes about work and behaviors while at work. Research on trust
has demonstrated that trust has a direct impact on attitudinal and behavioral outcomes such as
job satisfaction, organizational commitment, acceptance of organizational authority, and
organizational citizenship behavior (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Robinson, 1996). These results are not surprising given that trust is considered to be a critical element of an organization’s social capital. It is often the vehicle through which a network of strong, personal relationships develop between employees within an organization (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Bolino, Turnley, & Bloodgood, 2002; Kramer et al., 2001; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). New hires that begin their employment with an organization within which they place their trust should be more likely to maintain a stronger belief in their commitment to that organization and in that organization’s commitment to them.

The purpose of this paper is to present a theoretical framework for exploring the emergence of an interpersonal relationship between an applicant and an organization. Specifically, our interest is in understanding how applicants develop trust in organizations during the recruitment process. We propose a model of how certain characteristics of an organization and its representatives impact the development of a trust-based relationship. The paper begins with a definition of recruitment and a discussion of the two perspectives which guide the proposed model. Next, we discuss the role of trust in the recruiting process and the presence of two targets of trust. In support of the proposed model, the next section of the paper contains a series of propositions that detail the theoretical mechanisms through which the identified characteristics contribute to the development of trust during the recruiting process and how the presence of trust leads to a series of key consequences. Lastly, the paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the proposed framework and directions for future research.

**Defining Recruitment**
Recruitment generally captures a series of activities carried out by an organization over the course of a hiring process. As Barber (1998) described, recruitment activities are those activities that “help locate potential applicants and persuade them to pursue, and ultimately accept, employment with the organization.” (pp. 5). What is important to note in this definition is that recruitment is present in the hiring process up until the point at which the applicant accepts (or rejects) the job offer. We adopt a similar view of recruitment. A relational perspective on recruitment ultimately emphasizes how organizations might cater to applicants for the purpose of maximizing the likelihood that they will accept an offer of employment and enhancing the potential that they will carry a positive message to other applicants about the recruitment experience. Clearly, such issues reflect the spirit of recruitment as a broad set of activities that culminate only at the end of the hiring process. In addition, our theoretical work focuses on external recruitment, the objective of which is to identify and attract job applicants from outside the organization, rather than internal recruitment, which refers to identifying and selecting applicants from among individuals already holding jobs with the organization (Heneman & Judge, 2003). This focus was adopted in light of the likelihood that internal recruitment may be associated with different dynamics beyond those posited in this paper.

The framework presented in this paper is grounded in two perspectives. First, traditional recruitment theory often breaks the recruiting process into a set of stages delineated by specific events such as entrance into an applicant pool or receipt of a job offer (Barber, 1998). This frames recruiting as a linear experience, with applicants proceeding from one stage to the next in an ordered fashion. We sought to evaluate those factors that influence the development of trust across the entire spectrum of the recruiting process. Independent of a given stage, recruitment involves various events and elements that all serve the same purpose, helping an organization
attract and hire potential applicants. Different applicants may be exposed to these in different ways depending on the organization, the available position, and the manner in which a particular applicant chooses to seek information. This variability will necessarily impact how an interpersonal relationship develops. Certain applicants may receive information which leads them to trust an organization quickly (i.e., in an earlier stage of the process), while other applicants may develop their relationship with an organization after a longer period of time (i.e., in a later stage of the process). Ultimately, the factors that contribute to the development of trust (or lack thereof) can be found in all stages of the recruitment process and the identification of generally applicable constructs will link the activities of the various recruiting stages together. Thus, our conceptualization of relationship building incorporates a holistic perspective as opposed to framing the factors within a stage model.

Second, given the emphasis being placed on the development of trust between the applicant and the organization, we have chosen to develop the framework from a relational perspective. In doing so, we recognize that there are clearly a series of instrumental factors that will also contribute to determining applicants’ attitudes and actions during the recruitment process, above and beyond the extent to which applicants develop and maintain trusting relationships with an organization. Factors such as the characteristics of the job offered in terms of work responsibilities and the extent of job match, compensation and geographic location, the extent of potential job security, the availability of other job alternatives, and the opportunity for advancement will likely all impact whether an applicant is attracted to an organization, chooses to apply, remains in the applicant pool, and/or accepts an offer (Cable & Judge, 1994; Jurgensen, 1978; Lacy, Bokemeier, & Shepard, 1983; Powell & Goulet, 1996; Ryan, Sacco, McFarland, & Kriska, 2000; Rynes & Lawler, 1983; Schmit & Ryan, 1997; Taylor & Bergmann, 1987; Turban
et al., 1998). However, while applicants certainly evaluate these objective factors when considering job opportunities, they are also likely to evaluate more subjective and personal perceptions about organizations, such as the extent to which they trust an organization.

**The Role of Trust during Recruitment**

In this framework, the foremost goal of recruitment is to establish a healthy and positive relationship between the applicant and the organization. The establishment of this type of relationship is likely dependent on the organization engendering a reasonably high level of trust. Trust is defined as the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the positive expectation that the other party will be benevolent during the interaction, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party (Doney, Cannon, & Mullen, 1998; Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Trust plays an instrumental role when a relationship has two features, risk and interdependence (Jones & George, 1998; Rousseau et al., 1998). When the other party’s actions can be viewed as completely certain, trust is not needed in a relationship (Deutsch, 1958; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Uncertainty regarding the other’s intentions and possible actions is a source of risk, especially when these actions may bring a wide range of both positive and negative consequences. In the recruiting process, the organization retains a position of power in that the organization decides the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics required for the position, the strategies used to attract applicants, the selection procedure and selection tools, the number and type of applicants to pursue, and ultimately, which applicants will be successful throughout the course of the hiring process (Barber, 1998; Ployhart, Ryan, & Bennett, 1999; Rynes & Barber, 1990; Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Schmitt
& Chan, 1998). Applicants respond to an organization's requests, and in doing so, generally assume a subordinate position with their only source of power being the choice to self-select out of the applicant pool. Further, throughout the selection process the organization often has access to sensitive, private information about the applicant, can induce in applicants the discomfort inherent in being evaluated, and can make decisions that produce embarrassment, anger, and even self-deprecation if one is rejected. The power differential present in these two roles makes the applicant vulnerable to the actions of the organization. This vulnerability puts the applicant at risk. In the presence of this risk, trust becomes necessary as a means of justifying entry into the potentially uncertain relationship.

Interdependence exists when the interest of one party cannot be achieved without reliance upon another party (Mayer et al., 1995). The interdependent nature of a relationship assures both parties’ motivation to work together and to be vulnerable to the other’s behavior. An applicant and the organization are likely to reach an employment agreement when that agreement fulfills their mutual interests (i.e., the organization is acquiring an individual with the necessary talents, and the individual is acquiring a job with the necessary rewards). This interdependence, combined with the risk of being an applicant, suggests that an applicant (i.e., trustor) will need to develop a certain amount of trust in the organization (i.e., trustee) in order to justify entering into and continuing with the recruitment process.

Recruitment can be characterized as incorporating a series of exchange activities between the applicant and the organization. These exchange activities provide opportunities for the applicant to gather information about the extent to which the organization warrants their trust. An exchange activity involves the provision or receipt of information between the parties about the extent to which the applicant is an appropriate hire for the job. For example, activities such as
reading a job advertisement posted by an organization or taking a tour of an organization’s headquarters would each serve as exchange activities. Most recruiting experiences involve multiple exchanges between the applicant and the organization as each party attempts to accurately assess the other’s appropriateness. The information exchanged between the parties may be explicit (e.g., statement of job responsibilities, explanation of salary structure) or implicit (e.g., statements that signals the presence of certain work norms or commitment expectations). For example, when applicants attend an organization’s job fair, they may receive explicit information from the organization about its incentive program and implicit information about the extent to which new hires should expect to capitalize on certain development opportunities. After each interaction with the organization, the applicant uses the information gained to assist in evaluating the trustworthiness of the organization.

To understand how applicants build trust in organizations, it is important to recognize that there are two different targets of applicant trust during the recruitment process. An applicant may develop trust in an organization1 and an applicant may develop trust in an organization’s representatives. Classic perspectives in human resources research would suggest that the organization and the organization’s representatives are the same entity. Organization representatives have traditionally been viewed as agents of the organization (Eisenhardt, 1989; Walton & McKersie, 1991/1965). These individuals are called on to provide a human face for the organization and to execute the recruitment process on behalf of the organization. Thus, human resources theory would traditionally conclude that ones trust in an organization should

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1 This concept of trust in an organization is different from institution-based trust (Gulati, 1995; McKnight, Cummings, & Chervany, 1998; Rousseau et al., 1998; Williams, 2001). Institution-based trust develops when individuals believe that necessary organizational or societal control systems are in place to effectively prohibit disruptive behavior and promote cooperative actions. Alternatively, applicants evaluate the trustworthiness of an organization in response to its people, practice, and current position in the market. This reliance on a different set of antecedents differentiates trust in organizations from institution-based trust.
equate to ones trust in that organization’s representatives making these two targets synonymous. This would, of course, make any distinction between the two targets unnecessary.

However, as applicants interact with organization representatives, cognitive evaluations of the trustworthiness of these individuals should evolve that are independent of the applicants’ evaluation of the organization as a whole. Findings from research on trust suggest that people are able to cognitively separate an organization from its representatives and that this separation allows an individual to maintain different levels of trust in these two targets. For instance, Zaheer, McEvily, and Perrone (1998) asked purchasing managers to evaluate the extent to which they trusted their suppliers as organizations and the extent to which they trusted the suppliers’ representatives. When determining their trust in the representatives, the managers considered various emotional aspects that characterized their interactions with the representatives. This led to separate cognitive evaluations of trustworthiness with respect to the representatives relative to the supplier organization as a whole. Similarly, Hagen and Simons (2003) found that individuals can maintain a degree of trust in a company that differs from the extent to which they trust that company’s executive officers. These results imply that an applicant is capable of building an interpersonal, trust-based relationship with an organization that differs from the relationship they might build with that organization’s representatives. Indeed, one can conceive of a recruiting experience where applicants encounter information that separates the representatives from the organization in terms of their respective trustworthiness. For example, an applicant might have a negative interaction with an organization’s representatives that leads her to question the trustworthiness of these individuals. However, that same applicant may receive positive “spillover” information from family or friends that supports the development of trust in the organization as a whole. In essence, the applicant is simultaneously processing different sources
of information that lead to different levels of trust in two different targets. This potential asymmetry in the recruiting experience, where trust judgments of the representatives diverge from trust judgments of the organization, has theoretical relevance toward understanding how relationships develop between applicants and organizations. Presumably, such differences will emerge when the factors that contribute to trust judgments with respect to one target differ from those that contribute to trust judgments with respect to the other target. Thus, our framework differentiates trust in organizations from trust in an organization’s representatives for the purpose of capturing asymmetry and hence creating a more flexible and generalizable model.

MODELING THE DYNAMICS OF TRUST IN RECRUITMENT

In Figure 1, a model of the determinants and outcomes of applicant trust in organizations and applicant trust in an organization’s representatives (hereafter, recruiters) is shown. We propose that perceptions of organization competence, integrity, and benevolence will be related to applicant trust in organizations. Further, applicant trust in organizations will be greater when applicants perceive that their values are congruent with an organization’s norms, rules, and values, when they feel that organization representatives are acting in a manner consistent with the organization’s stated rules and policies, and when they believe that the selection and recruitment procedures employed by an organization are just. Alternatively, perceptions of recruiter competence, integrity, and benevolence will be related to applicant trust in recruiters. In addition, applicant trust in recruiters will be impacted by the extent to which they believe that recruiters are treating them with respect. Finally, it is proposed that the extent to which applicants trust the organization and its recruiters will influence specific recruitment outcomes.
The theoretical and empirical rationale for the variables and linkages shown in Figure 1 is discussed below.

Determinants of Applicant Trust in Organizations

Applicant trust in an organization should be determined by how that organization is perceived by the applicant. Organizations that are viewed as more competent, benevolent, and possessing more integrity should garner increased levels of applicant trust. An organization that is viewed as one which exercises fair procedures and demonstrates behavioral consistency should be considered more trustworthy. Further, applicants should place more trust in organizations whose culture, climate, values, norms, and goals are viewed by the applicants as being congruent with their own values, goals, personality, and attitudes.

Distinctive Competence. Certain organizations possess specific skills and characteristics that enable them to exert influence within a specific market or industry, achieve organizational goals, and acquire an advantage over competitors (Makadok & Walker, 2000). These organizations often emerge as industry leaders and are viewed by the general public as having a high degree of competence. Previous research has demonstrated that becoming familiar with an organization through the press, for example, can directly impact that organization’s reputation in the eye’s of potential applicants even before those applicants have experienced direct contact with an organization’s representatives (Brooks, Highhouse, Russell, & Mohr, 2003). Organizations with distinctive competence are often perceived by applicants as more attractive (Collins & Stevens, 2002). Compared to their competitors, this distinctive competence translates into a greater ability to satisfy employees’ economic needs (e.g., receiving a competitive salary) and self-enhancement needs (e.g., being a member of a competent group) (Abrams & Hogg,
It has been demonstrated that people tend to trust and take risks with parties that they believe have the power and capability to realize their wishes (Barber, 1983; Butler & Cantrell, 1984; Doney et al., 1998). Organizations that are perceived by applicants as possessing a high level of distinctive competence are more likely to engender that power, giving applicants a reason to place their trust in the organization’s words and promises. Consequently, we propose that,

**Proposition 1.** The perceived distinctive competence of an organization will be positively associated with the level of applicant trust in that organization.

**Organization Integrity.** An organization that is perceived by applicants as having integrity will adhere to a set of principles that applicants find acceptable (Becker, 1998; Mayer et al., 1995). Specifically, organizations with a high level of integrity should honor their commitment to public promises and be viewed by the general public as displaying a strong sense of fairness. For example, Southwest Airlines has publicly promised to never lay off employees and has kept this promise for over 30 years (Gittell, 2003). For potential applicants, this kept promise likely sends a strong signal that Southwest Airlines will honor its promises and thus is an organization with a high level of integrity. In contrast, organizations that are known for breaching psychological contracts, an action that many see as a direct violation of a promise (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), will send strong signals that question the integrity of these organizations in the eyes of potential applicants. Trust evaluations are heavily influenced by the extent to which the party of interest is viewed as possessing integrity. Indeed, integrity has proven to be an important antecedent of trust both conceptually and empirically (Mayer & Davis, 1999). Thus, those organizations that are perceived by applicants as possessing more integrity
will engender applicant trust and in turn, perceptions of less integrity will detract from the development of applicant trust. Consequently, we propose that,

*Proposition 2.* The perceived integrity of an organization will be positively associated with the level of applicant trust in that organization.

**Organization Benevolence.** Benevolence is often defined as the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to and take care of the trustor, independent of a direct egocentric profit motive (Mayer et al., 1995). An organization may demonstrate aspects of benevolence by engaging in altruistic acts, displaying social responsibility, or showing goodwill toward individuals in society. Individuals should view an organization as being more benevolent when they believe that the organization’s actions demonstrate true concern for another’s welfare. For example, organizations such as The Body Shop and Aveda Corporation, which are known for their commitment to environmental conservation (Shearer, 1990), may be viewed as more benevolent in that their actions reflect a concern for the ecology of future generations. The textile organization Malden Mills may be viewed by the public as more benevolent in response to its decision to continue compensating its employees’ during the reconstruction of their factory following a fire, an action that reflects concern for its employees and the local community (Teal, 1996). Similarly, organizations such as UBS and Johnson and Johnson have made explicit statements about their commitment to programs that foster workforce diversity (Snider, Hill, & Martin, 2003), an action that reflects an intention to contribute to society by helping to address key societal issues. These are only three examples from a broad spectrum of benevolent actions. However, while the manner in which benevolence is manifested may differ infinitely, the perception of benevolence will be based on the attribution that the actions are demonstrative of
unusual compassion toward society when there is little environmental incentive or pressure to do so (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Heider, 1958; Hewstone, 1989).

Previous research has demonstrated that the general public responds to information about the social actions of organizations and uses this information to construct their image of an organization (Yoon & Gürhan-Canli, 2003). In response, many organizations take concerted steps to communicate these actions to society (Gray, Owen, & Adams, 1996). As members of the general public, applicants will also be privy to this information and have the capacity to use it in constructing their view of the organization. In a field experiment conducted by Highhouse, Stierwalt, Bachiochi, Elder, and Fisher (1999), student members of a national organization of African American engineers and currently employed African American engineers reported being more likely to apply to an organization when that organization used a hypothetical job advertisement that was identity conscious (i.e., supported affirmative action) than when it was identity blind (i.e., supported equal employment opportunity). Organizations that promote affirmative action through comprehensive diversity programs (Rynes & Rosen, 1995) may signal to applicants that the organization is concerned for the welfare of minority workers. The knowledge that an organization has engaged in benevolent actions toward others suggests to potential applicants that the organization may extend that benevolence to them, thereby demonstrating concern for their welfare. From the applicants’ perspective, this sense of impending goodwill should reduce the risk associated with establishing an employment relationship and enhance the likelihood that applicants will be willing to place their trust in the organization. Consequently, we propose that,

*Proposition 3.* The perceived benevolence of an organization will be positively associated with the level of applicant trust in that organization.
Procedural Justice. There is a rich literature documenting that people evaluate the fairness of the processes used to make decisions that concern them. These perceptions about the methods, mechanisms, and procedures used to determine personal outcomes is referred to as *procedural justice* (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Research has demonstrated that applicants pay attention to procedural justice issues when evaluating the process that an organization uses to collect information about them and the way in which that information is used to make hiring decisions (e.g., Bauer, Maertz, Dolen, & Campion, 1998; Gilliland, 1994; Macan, Avedon, Paese, & Smith, 1994). Such processes are considered fair by applicants when they believe that all applicants are being evaluated in the same manner, when they perceive that steps are being taken to suppress sources of bias in the identification and evaluation process, when they believe that the information collected by the organization for the purpose of evaluation is job-related and accurate, and when they are given the opportunity to provide input in the evaluation or to voice their concerns (Gilliland, 1993; Leventhal, 1980).

Research has also demonstrated that applicant procedural justice evaluations impact their attitudes about the recruiting and selection process and their behavior within that process. Ployhart and Ryan (1997) surveyed graduate school applicants and found that, in general, the use of fair selection procedures on the part of the department responsible for admission decisions resulted in more favorable perceptions of that department. Schmit and Ryan (1997) reported that process fairness was identified by police officer applicants as playing a role in whether they chose to withdraw from a selection process. Further, Rynes et al. (1991) interviewed job seekers throughout the recruiting process and found that the recruitment procedures used had a direct impact on applicants’ decisions to accept an offer.
Procedural justice is linked to trust through the “fundamental social dilemma” present in all types of social interactions (Lind, 1995, 2001). The dilemma addresses whether one individual can trust others not to exploit him or her in the context of an interdependent relationship. Essentially, individuals can choose to enter into and benefit from an interdependent relationship at the risk exploitation, or they can choose not to enter into the relationship, protecting them from exploitation, but preventing them from realizing the benefits of the relationship. In the face of this dilemma, individuals often rely on the other party’s demonstrated fairness as a basis for establishing trust and entry, particularly when they lack information about the other party (Lind, 2001; van den Bos & Lind, 1998). Lewicki, Wiethoff, and Tomlinson (forthcoming) reviewed the literature on the relationship between justice and trust. They noted the potential for a strong relationship between these two constructs. Evidence from recent meta-analytic studies confirms their speculation (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). The link between justice perceptions and trust is strengthened when one party has power over the other party (Chen, Brockner, & Greenberg, 2003; Korsgaard, Schweiger, & Sapienza, 1995). Since applicants hold a comparatively less powerful position during the recruitment process, their eagerness to reduce the fundamental social dilemma should give rise to a desire to judge how much they can trust an organization based on how fair the organization’s recruitment and selection process is (van den Bos & Lind, 2002). Consequently, we propose that,

*Proposition 4.* The extent to which an organization’s recruitment and selection process is viewed as procedurally just will be positively associated with the level of applicant trust in that organization.
Behavioral Consistency. The trust literature defines behavioral consistency as the reliability or predictability of a trustee (Butler, 1991; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). In our framework, we define behavioral consistency somewhat differently as the alignment between actions of an organization’s representatives as a group and those prescribed by the organization’s published policies. In social interactions, examinations of inter-group phenomena have revealed that people may attribute others’ behavior to internal personal traits or to the characteristics of the groups to which they belong (Hewstone, 1989; Tajfel, 1978). In response to interacting with an organization representative and observing that representative’s behavior, applicants have the opportunity to make both a personal attribution (e.g., he treated me warmly because he is a nice person) and an organizational attribution (e.g., he treated me warmly because that type of behavior is valued in this organization). However, the presence of these two attributions raises the potential for ambiguity in that it is not clear which attribution is primary. This lack of clarity confounds an applicant’s ability to correctly interpret a representative’s behavior.

Consistency among organization representatives in terms of their behavior should help reduce this ambiguity. When representatives demonstrate similar behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, those characteristics are more likely to be attributed to their common group membership (i.e., the organization that they are representing). The consistency provides applicants with perceptual cues that help them to infer the represented entity (in this case, the organization) existent in an aggregate of individuals (Campbell, 1958; Sherman, Hamilton, & Lewis, 1999). This behavioral consistency is valuable to applicants. Social psychology research has demonstrated convincingly that people are consistency seekers (Festinger, 1957; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Heider, 1958), especially in uncertain situations. If representatives behave in a similar
fashion despite apparent individual differences among them, applicants will be more confident that the behavior they observed reflects stable characteristics inherent in the organization.

Applicants’ general expectations about representatives’ behavior may be based on their understanding of the organization’s rules, values, and procedures. Throughout their interactions, applicants will judge the extent to which the representatives behave in a manner that is consistent with those expectations. For example, applicants may discuss with representatives topics such as whether the organization promotes teamwork or advocates individual competency. If organizational representatives stress that the company values teamwork, and in turn, the structure of work clearly emphasizes the value of working as a team, this consistency between the organization’s stated expectations and the representatives words should support applicant faith in the organization. When applicants detect evidence suggesting consistent behavior on the part of representatives, they may use that information as a means for justifying a choice to trust the organization. Alternatively, if organizational representatives make claims about how a company values its people and how it views employee satisfaction and commitment as a key measure of success, yet the structure of the organization’s incentive-based reward system accentuates that success in the organization is judged by financial results and accomplishments over all else, this inconsistency should lead applicants to question the veracity of the representatives’ statements. This lack of behavioral consistency should raise concerns about the extent to which the organization may be trusted (Lind, 1995, 2001; van den Bos & Lind, 1998, 2002). Consequently, we propose that,

*Proposition 5.* The level of organization representatives’ behavioral consistency will be positively associated with applicant trust in organizations.
Person-Organization Fit. We also propose that the extent to which applicants believe there is a high level of Person-Organization (P-O) fit (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991) will contribute to the level of applicant trust in the organization. P-O fit is generally conceptualized as the extent to which an organization and an individual share similar fundamental characteristics (Kristof, 1996). A high degree of P-O fit suggests that an individual’s values, goals, personality, and attitudes are congruent with an organization’s culture, climate, values, goals, and norms. An applicant who obtains information about an organization’s culture, climate, values, goals, and norms has the capacity to make a subjective P-O fit judgment. Dineen, Ash, and Noe (2002) demonstrated that applicants who perceive that a high degree of P-O fit exists with an organization are more likely to view that organization as more attractive. Rynes et al. (1991) found that 30% of job seekers use their initial contact with organization representatives as a basis for determining their P-O fit perceptions and their choice to pursue employment with the organization.

Applicants who perceive a high degree of P-O fit may view those organizations as being more natural, predictable and easier to understand (Judge & Cable, 1997). When an organization demonstrates a pattern of goals, values, and norms that mirror an individual’s own preferences, the organization’s implicit expectations should be more familiar to that individual. Organization familiarity should contribute to an applicant viewing an organization as more predictable. This perceived predictability in the organization’s behavior reduces uncertainty and increases trust levels (Deutsch, 1958; Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Mayer et al., 1995). On the other hand, perceptions of value incongruence quickly lead to distrust and suspicion (Sitkin & Roth, 1993). Consequently, we propose that,
Proposition 6. Applicant perceived fit with an organization’s culture, values, and norms will be positively associated with the level of applicant trust in that organization.

Determinants of Applicant Trust in Recruiters

Applicants form strong impressions of organizational recruiters (Rynes, Heneman, & Schwab, 1980) and these impressions should determine the amount of trust that applicants have in the recruiters. Recruiters that are viewed as more competent, benevolent, and possessing more integrity should also garner increased levels of applicant trust. During the interaction between the two parties, those applicants who feel that they have received fair interpersonal treatment should respond with greater levels of recruiter trust.

Recruiter Competence, Integrity, and Benevolence. Research indicates that recruiters are considered to be more effective when they are viewed as informative (i.e., knowledgeable about the job, position, and company) and personable (i.e., caring, empathetic, and concerned) (Connerley & Rynes, 1997). Applicants are more likely to accept an impending job offer when the recruiters are perceived as warm and friendly (e.g., Alderfer & McCord, 1970; Goltz & Giannantonio, 1995; Taylor & Bergmann, 1987; Turban & Dougherty, 1992). This suggests that there are specific recruiter skills and traits that impact whether applicants view them as displaying competence, integrity, and benevolence. Recruiters that ask difficult questions are often viewed as more competent (Turban et al., 1998). Recruiters who provide more information to applicants and who display enthusiasm during the process are generally viewed as more competent and more concerned about the given applicant’s future (Connerley & Rynes, 1997).

Applicant perceptions about recruiter competence, integrity, and benevolence should contribute to applicant judgments about whether recruiters warrant their trust. Those recruiters
who are perceived as having more of these three characteristics should engender greater levels of applicant trust (Mayer et al., 1995). Those recruiters whose skills and abilities demonstrate a high level of competence in completing their job responsibilities, or an advanced capability to make appropriate judgments in specific situations (Mishra, 1996), should be perceived by applicants as more trustworthy. Those recruiters who maintain an alignment between their words and deeds, and who are careful to adhere to a set of morally acceptable principles, should be perceived by applicants as more trustworthy (Mayer et al., 1995; McFall, 1987). For example, recruiters who take cautionary steps to ensure that interview questions are job-related and non-discriminatory should warrant enhanced applicant trust. Finally, recruiters whose intentions and motives demonstrate a sense of benevolence and concern toward applicants should be perceived by applicants as more trustworthy. Consequently, we propose that,

*Proposition 7.* The perceived competence of recruiters will be positively associated with the level of applicant trust in recruiters.

*Proposition 8.* The perceived integrity of recruiters will be positively associated with the level of applicant trust in recruiters.

*Proposition 9.* The perceived benevolence of recruiters will be positively associated with the level of applicant trust in recruiters.

**Interactional Justice.** People are sensitive to the way that they are treated by authority figures and decision makers (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Receiving fair treatment in a social relationship satisfies an individual’s need for self-esteem and positive self-identity. Bies and colleague (1987; Bies & Moag, 1986) coined the term “interactional justice” to capture people’s concerns about the “quality of interpersonal treatment” that they receive when interacting with others concerning the allocation of desirable outcomes. Essentially, individuals expect to be
treated with appropriate respect and truthfulness, and with sufficient explanations and sensitivity 
(Bies, 1987; Bies & Moag, 1986; Greenberg, 1993a, 1993b). When individuals believe that they 
are receiving such treatment, they are likely to view that treatment as interactionally just\(^2\).

The process of recruitment creates an organizational context that appears to be 
particularly sensitive to interactional justice issues. Bies and Moag (1986) asked 96 MBA job 
candidates, prior to the job search process, to define a set of fairness criteria that they expected 
recruiters to follow. The results indicated that candid, truthful, and polite communications are 
considered to be more interactionally just. Schuler (1993) also emphasized these factors by 
noting the value of providing feedback to applicants in an honest, considerate, and 
understandable manner. A significant amount of research has emphasized the importance of 
using recruiters who are perceived as warm, friendly, and genuinely interested in the applicant 
(e.g., Goltz & Giannantonio, 1995; Taylor & Bergmann, 1987; Turban & Dougherty, 1992). 
Interpersonally sensitive behavior on the part of recruiters demonstrates to applicants that 
members of the organization are concerned about and sensitive to their rights and needs as 
individuals. Therefore, organization representatives that engage in high-quality interpersonal 
treatment should be more effective at gaining and maintaining an applicant’s trust. Consequently, 
we propose that,

**Proposition 10.** The extent to which applicants view their interpersonal interactions with 
recruiters as interactionally-just will be positively associated with the level of applicant 
trust in recruiters.

**Recruitment Outcomes**

\(^2\) While interactional justice may appear to be the same as procedural justice, empirical evidence suggests that they 
are in fact two separate constructs (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 
2001).
Because an applicant’s choice to apply for a position is voluntary, an organization must motivate potential employees to apply for available positions. Applicants should be more motivated to apply for positions in those organizations that are viewed as more attractive. Correspondingly, an applicant’s attraction to an organization is considered to be a key outcome variable in recruitment research (Barber, 1998; Rynes & Barber, 1990). After an organization has enticed an applicant to apply, two additional goals associated with recruitment include the retention of applicants in the applicant pool and the elicitation of an acceptance on the part of the applicant should the organization choose to extend an offer.

Perceived organizational competence, integrity, and benevolence represent three different components that contribute to an organization’s public image (Tom, 1971). Previous recruitment research has demonstrated a link between organizational image and applicant attraction. Essentially, an organization’s reputation in the eyes of the general public impacts the extent to which applicants are attracted to that organization (e.g., Belt & Paolillo, 1982; Gatewood, Gowen, & Lautenschlager, 1993; Turban & Greening, 1997). For example, Judge and Bretz (1992) found evidence suggesting that applicants prefer organizations whose actions display fairness, concern for others, honesty, and an emphasis on high achievement. Previous research has also demonstrated that applicant perceptions of P-O fit impact judgments of organizational attraction (Dineen et al., 2002) and applicant perceptions of procedural justice impact applicant withdrawal from the applicant pool and intentions to accept an offer (e.g., Ployhart & Ryan, 1997; Rynes et al., 1991).

While P-O fit, procedural justice, and the components of organization image have traditionally been treated as exerting a direct effect on the outcomes of applicant attraction, applicant retention, and job offer acceptance, preliminary evidence suggests that the effect may
actually be indirect. In three field studies, Brockner, Siegel, Daly, Tyler, and Martin (1997) demonstrated that when employees believe that an organization has acted in a procedurally-just manner, their attitudes about the outcomes resulting from those decisions play a lesser role in determining their support for the organization. In other words, even if the resulting outcomes are not favorable to the individual, they continue to show support for the organization if they believe the organization has acted fairly. Interestingly, further investigation of their results revealed that when employees’ trust in the organization is considered, procedural justice becomes non-significant. When employees have a high level of trust in an organization, that level of trust is what determines their support for the organization; instead of the perceptions of procedural justice per se. Thus, we suggest that the antecedent variables determine the level of applicant trust in organizations, and that this trust judgment is the actual psychological construct that determines recruitment outcomes.

Applicants with a high level of trust in an organization should view that organization as more attractive in response to the belief that this organization displays a greater likelihood of satisfying their needs, demonstrating concern for their welfare, keeping its promises, and sharing similar values and characteristics. In addition, applicants should be more willing to continue with the selection process and respond positively to an offer in response to their view that an organization is trustworthy as evidenced by the use of procedurally-just actions. If the information gained during recruitment suggests that the organization is not using fair procedures, is less competent or benevolent, has questionable integrity, or that the values that characterize the organization do not match with applicant personal values, applicants should respond with less trust in the organization; a state that should enhance the likelihood that applicants choose to leave the applicant pool and pursue jobs elsewhere. Further, trust often produces positive affect
(Jones & George, 1998; McAllister, 1995; Williams, 2001). A higher level of trust should be accompanied by a set of positive feelings such as hope, faith, confidence, and assurance (Lewicki et al., 1998). These positive feelings should help to convince applicants that the organization would be an attractive place to work. To summarize, applicants’ trust in an organization endows them with the cognitive and affective reasons necessary to judge whether an organization is attractive, worthy of their continued commitment, and deserving of final offer acceptance. Consequently, we propose that,

*Proposition 11.* Applicant trust in organizations will be positively associated with applicant attraction, applicant retention, and job offer acceptance.

Previous research has also demonstrated that an applicant’s interactions with recruiters can be an important determinant of applicant attraction and job offer acceptance (e.g., Alderfer & McCord, 1970; Goltz & Giannantonio, 1995; Rynes et al., 1991; Taylor & Bergmann, 1987; Turban & Dougherty, 1992). While these studies demonstrate a direct link between recruiter characteristics and recruitment outcomes, we believe that the relationship between these characteristics and applicant attraction, applicant retention, and job offer acceptance is mediated by the extent to which applicants develop trust in recruiters. Applicants with a high level of recruiter trust should view an organization as more attractive in that the use of representatives who demonstrate competence, integrity, and benevolence, and who behave in an interactionally-just manner reflects well on the organization. Further, applicants should be more willing to continue with the selection process and respond positively to an offer in response to perceptions that recruiters are treating them fairly and with respect. If recruiters treat applicants in an inappropriate and unprofessional manner, it is likely that applicants will respond by questioning the trustworthiness of recruiters. Such questions should increase the chance that applicants
choose to leave the applicant pool for other job opportunities. Thus, applicants’ trust in recruiters provides a means for evaluating the extent to which an organization is attractive, whether they should pursue employment, and whether they should accept a job offer. Consequently, we propose that,

Proposition 12. Applicant trust in recruiters will be positively associated with applicant attraction, applicant retention, and job offer acceptance.

DISCUSSION

Since its one-page treatment in the first *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology* (1976), recruitment research has proliferated dramatically. Much progress has been made toward understanding various aspects of the process and the impact of these aspects on both attitudinal (e.g., intention to apply, willingness to accept an offer) and posthire (e.g., satisfaction, commitment, length of service) outcomes for new recruits (Barber, 1998; Breaugh & Starke, 2000). However, recruitment research has been repeatedly critiqued for its piecemeal approach and lack of solid theoretical integration (Breaugh & Starke, 2000; Rynes, 1991; Rynes & Cable, 2003). While the demonstrated effects have often been clear and replicable, the mechanisms theorized to underlie these effects have gone unexplored.

In this paper, we argue that the construct of trust has the potential to serve as an important psychological mechanism for understanding the interpersonal dynamics that can impact recruitment. We provide a framework for examining how applicants develop trust during the recruitment process as a function of certain characteristics of the organization and its representatives. We offer a model that posits a series of antecedents important in determining applicant trust in two separate targets, organizations and recruiters. The extent of applicant trust
in these targets contributes to the emergence of specific recruitment outcomes valued by organizations. The framework is reflective of a noted shift in recruitment research from work that focuses on the instrumental aspects of recruitment to work that focuses on the relational aspects of recruitment. Conceptualizing recruitment from the applicant’s perspective acknowledges the critical role of interpersonal relationships in the recruitment process as applicants and organizations interact to ascertain the appropriateness and likelihood of establishing an employment relationship. Given this interaction, it is important to consider how interpersonal variables can serve to enhance our knowledge of the recruitment process. Including trust as a variable in recruitment research links our knowledge of trust as a fundamental element in interpersonal interactions with the recognition that trust development has the potential to help explain applicant behavior as it relates to organizational attraction and membership.

Implications for Future Research

An important next step is to demonstrate empirical support for the relationships shown in Figure 1. The model may be evaluated using a variety of research designs and methods. Interviews and surveys may be used to assess job applicants on the proposed variables. Field quasi-experimental designs could be developed where recruitment information or processes that reflect varying degrees of the antecedents are manipulated to examine the impact of these changes on trust levels and outcomes. A policy-capturing approach may be adopted to operationalize various recruitment experiences on the basis of the different determinants with the intent of examining corresponding changes in intentions. Alternatively, the use of longitudinal designs wherein an applicant pool is followed throughout the course of a recruitment experience
would facilitate a systematic recording of the effect of recruitment activities on applicant trust levels and resulting outcomes.

In addition, future research should also explore potential boundary conditions. Given the complex system of activities that characterize recruitment, moderators likely exist that will define and limit the model’s generalizability. For example, although we postulate that the framework should be generally applicable to most applicants, certain types of applicants may offer additional research questions of interest. Individuals who have experienced job loss may feel that a psychological contract with their previous employer was violated. This previous trust violation may detract from their ability or willingness to establish trust in another organization regardless of whether that organization and its recruiters display a series of trustworthy characteristics. Further, it is reasonable to foresee that applicants could vary in the extent to which they anticipate remaining with an organization should they be hired. Some applicants might possess a long-term orientation toward employment for the purpose of establishing a relationship that will purportedly fulfill their needs for a number of years. Alternatively, other applicants might possess a short-term orientation toward employment with the intent of moving on to other opportunities in the near future. This concept of time orientation, or anticipated tenure (Cardon, 2001), has the potential to influence the recruiting process. When applicants intend to remain with an organization for longer period of time, they should be more motivated to develop a relational psychological contract with the organization (Rousseau & Libuser, 1997), making trust an important element in their relationship with the organization. On the other hand, when applicants anticipate leaving an organization after a short period of time, the realization of a strong trust-based relationship may not be relevant at all in their decision to pursue a job opportunity.
The present framework was proposed from the perspective of evaluating applicant perceptions in an effort to underscore the importance of these perceptions as predictors of trust development. Implicit in this perspective is a methodological approach wherein the model would be tested within an organization for the purpose of capturing inter-individual differences. Applicants should vary in terms of their exposure to relevant organizational information and their idiosyncratic perceptions of a particular organization and its recruiters. These differences should produce corresponding variance across a pool of applicants in terms of the extent to which they develop trust in the organization and its recruiters. However, future research should explore the use of methodological approaches that examine the role of inter-organizational differences. When theoretically appropriate, certain elements of the framework could be measured across organizations resulting in the test of a mixed-level model. Assuming sufficient agreement existed among applicant ratings, such ratings could be aggregated to allow for the gradation of organizations in terms of their competence, integrity, and benevolence, for example. Alternatively, normative, objective indicators such as sales, market share, financial indices, or business media rankings, could also be used to differentiate between organizations. These organization level variables could be combined with individual level measures of the remaining antecedent variables in the framework, and then used to predict individual level outcomes (Rasbash et al., 1999; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Singer, 1998).

This model of the development of a trust-based relationship between an applicant and an organization targets the various organization and recruiter characteristics deemed relevant in determining trust judgments. Future research might extend this framework by focusing on the various characteristics of applicants. Certain individual difference variables may differentiate applicants in the extent to which they develop trust in organizations and trust in recruiters. For
example, recruiting contexts are usually ambiguous situations for applicants. They are faced with a nontrivial amount of uncertainty about organization expectations, future job responsibilities and colleagues, and the likelihood of receiving an offer. Disposition to trust, defined as a general willingness to trust others (McKnight et al., 1998; Rotter, 1971, 1980), is a predictor of trusting behavior in highly ambiguous, novel, or unstructured situations (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982). Thus, disposition to trust may represent one of many individual difference variables that may also impact trust development during the recruiting process.

Future research might also choose to explore how applicants external to the organization access and process the information needed to construct perceptual judgments about the model determinants. Applicants have a number of sources of information that they may draw from when judging these variables. For example, many organizations support their recruitment activities with a comprehensive website that can instruct potential applicants about an organization’s strategic goals and objectives, mission and social priorities, industry accomplishments, and general culture. This information may suggest to applicants whether an organization can be viewed as benevolent in its actions and/or the extent to which they would “fit” with the culture of that organization. Also, potential applicants are exposed to an extensive array of print media that can contribute to applicant judgments about a particular organization and its representatives (Brooks et al., 2003). Conducting research into where and how applicants acquire a basis for their perceptions may be a particularly interesting direction for future work.

Finally, it is our hope that this framework will stimulate future trust research as well. Since recruitment takes place over time, longitudinal methodologies can be adopted to study the origin and development of trust in a relationship. From the first encounter between an applicant and an organization to the establishment of an employment relationship, a trust relationship
develops from its fragile infancy to a stable and mature condition providing a forum for observing and documenting the life of a trust relationship. Further, the recruitment process provides a natural setting for studying trust repair (i.e., the rebuilding of trust after a trust breach, e.g., Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000; Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2004). It is not uncommon to hear about organizations that fail to meet applicant expectations by engaging in actions such as delaying feedback or asking inappropriate interview questions (Rynes et al., 1991). When these types of events occur, applicants may feel that they have been mistreated. They may lower their trust in the organization, and even choose to self-select out. In response to these dynamics, trust researchers have the opportunity to investigate how applicant trust might be rebuilt for the purpose of resolving trust violations.

CONCLUSION

Effective recruitment is often a challenge. The limited opportunity for interaction between organizations and applicants boosts the importance of executing all aspects of the process in an appropriate manner. As a result, recruiting is often a resource-intensive process. In fact, many organizations invest tremendously in advertisement and public relations in the hope of building a positive employment image. While an organization can quickly recoup these investments with the signing of a high-quality applicant, mistakes are likely to be costly. Organizations may be able to increase their recruiting success rates by recognizing the importance of applicant trust. The presence of a trust between the applicant and the organization has the potential to play a pivotal role in the relationship between an organization’s investment in social and public relations and the strategic objectives of recruitment. The organization that is able to properly build and manage trust-based relationships with applicants during the
recruitment process presumably has much to gain. Thus, organizations intent on leveraging their recruitment process as a means of attracting and retaining talent may realize that potential by acknowledging the role and evolution of trust as both an applicant coping mechanism and a foundation for meaningful interpersonal relationships.
REFERENCES


Figure Caption

*Figure 1.* Model of the determinants and outcomes of applicant trust in organizations and applicant trust in recruiters.
Determinants of Applicant Trust in Organizations:

• Distinctive competence (P1)
• Organization integrity (P2)
• Organization benevolence (P3)
• Procedural justice (P4)
• Behavioral consistency (P5)
• P-O fit (P6)

Trust in organizations

(P11)

Recruitment Outcomes:

• Applicant attraction
• Applicant retention
• Job offer acceptance

Determinants of Applicant Trust in Recruiters:

• Recruiter competence (P7)
• Recruiter integrity (P8)
• Recruiter benevolence (P9)
• Interactional justice (P10)

Trust in recruiters

(P12)