

COMMUNICATING NEGATIVE HIRE DECISIONS TO APPLICANTS: FULFILLING PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS

Marie Waung

University of Michigan-Dearborn

Thomas S. Brice

The Polk Company

ABSTRACT: This study demonstrates that characteristics of rejection letters combine in a complex manner to affect impressions of the organization, and likelihood of re-applying to and of patronizing the organization. Specifically, the most negative reactions to rejection letters were found when a contact person existed, along with a long time interval before receiving a letter that failed to include an explicit statement of rejection. Some support was found for the failure to receive a rejection letter as a psychological contract violation.

The way in which an applicant is rejected may impact company image, applicant self-concept, and the applicant's likelihood of re-applying to or patronizing an organization (Aamodt & Peggans, 1988; Fielden & Dulek, 1982; Feinberg, Meoli-Stanton, & Gable, 1996). Despite the potential impact of rejection letters on applicant impressions and behaviors, only two published studies (Aamodt & Peggans, 1988; Feinberg et al., 1996) have examined empirically reactions to rejection letter characteristics.

Aamodt and Peggans (1988) found more positive reactions from job applicants when "friendly" statements, information about the person who was offered the job, and a promise to keep the resume on file were included in the rejection letter. Feinberg et al. (1996) demonstrated that rejection letters with a more positive tone resulted in a better image of the company, and a greater likelihood of recommending the company to a friend and of recontracting the company for future employment compared to letters with a negative tone.

Address correspondence to Marie Waung, Behavioral Sciences, 4901 Evergreen Road, University of Michigan-Dearborn, Dearborn, MI 48128-1491; e-mail: MWAUNG@UMD.UMICH.EDU.

In Study 1, we examined the effects of the time interval between the mailing of application materials and the receipt of a rejection letter, and whether or not a rejection decision was explicitly stated in the letter, as they impacted impressions of the organization, and likelihood of re-applying to and patronizing the organization. The moderating effects of the presence or absence of a contact person were also tested.

While few studies have examined reactions to rejection letter characteristics, no studies have examined reactions to failing to receive a rejection letter. In Study 2, we examined whether failing to receive a rejection letter from a rejecting organization was experienced by applicants as a psychological contract violation.

STUDY 1

In the organizational socialization literature, unmet expectations are assumed to cause post-entry adjustment problems such as low job satisfaction and early turnover (e.g., Feldman, 1976; Porter, Lawler, & Hackman, 1975; Schein, 1978; Van Maanen, 1976; Wanous, 1980; Wanous, Poland, Premack, & Davis, 1992). Similarly, in pre-employment situations, unmet expectations may cause negative reactions in job applicants. Given the assumption that applicants share a basic expectation that rejection information will be presented in a clear, forthright, courteous manner, when experiences fall short of this expectation, applicants are likely to react negatively.

No research has examined applicant reactions to the time interval between the completion of application materials and the receipt of a rejection letter. However, a long time interval before receiving a rejection letter is likely to violate applicants' expectations regarding courteous treatment. As such, we predicted that a longer time interval would result in more negative reactions to rejection letters.

Hypothesis 1: A long time interval between the sending of the application materials and the receipt of a rejection letter will result in a more negative impression and less likelihood of re-applying to and of patronizing the organization, compared to medium and short time intervals.

Aamodt and Peggans (1988), in a content analysis of the characteristics of 120 actual rejection letters, found that only 21% of the letters contained an indirect statement of rejection (e.g., the position has been filled; we are not able to offer you the position; the offer was made to someone else) and 16% contained a direct statement of rejection (e.g.,

there are no suitable openings for you; not enough fit between you and the position; you have not been selected). Thus, the majority of rejection letters examined by the researchers did not contain a statement (direct or indirect) of rejection.

Rejection letters that fail to reject are likely to be confusing to applicants (Brown, 1993). Furthermore, the failure to send a rejection letter containing an explicit statement of rejection is expected to violate applicant expectations regarding clear and forthright organizational communication. As such, we predicted that the absence of an explicit statement of rejection would result in more negative reactions from applicants than the presence of such a statement.

Hypothesis 2: Rejection letters that fail to explicitly state that the applicant was rejected will result in a more negative impression and less likelihood of re-applying to and of patronizing the organization compared to letters that explicitly state rejection.

The presence of a contact person may result in higher expectations regarding courteous treatment from the organization. That is, given the existence of a specific person responsible for the recruitment, application, and selection of job candidates, applicants are more likely to expect the timely receipt of an unambiguous, forthright rejection letter from a rejecting organization. Thus, given the existence of a contact person, applicants are likely to react more negatively to rejection letters received after a long time interval and that fail to contain an explicit statement of rejection.

Hypothesis 3: The existence of a contact person will result in more extreme negative reactions to a long time interval and to no explicit statement of rejection, compared to the absence of a contact person.

METHOD

Participants

Fifty-six students, enrolled in a part-time MBA program located in the midwestern U.S., participated in the study. Thirty-seven percent of the sample were female, and twenty percent of the sample were minorities. Students were employed full-time with the three most common industries of employment being: automotive (22%), service (17%), and health care (14%).

Procedure

Participants each responded to twelve rejection letters in which the time interval between the application and the receipt of the rejection letter (i.e., 1–10 days, 11–30 days, 31 or more days); whether or not the letter explicitly stated that the applicant was not selected for the position (e.g., “You did not quite match what we are looking for” versus “We will keep your resume on file”); and whether or not the application materials were sent to a contact person (i.e., contact person, no contact person) were manipulated in a completely crossed $3 \times 2 \times 2$ design. The appendix contains samples of a rejection letter containing an explicit statement of rejection and a letter without such a statement.

Respondents were told to imagine that they, although currently employed, had recently begun to test the available job market by applying for a number of positions. They were also told that they had targeted organizations that had position openings advertised in the local newspaper, and that the previous month had been a particularly active period in that they had responded to twelve job announcements early in the month.

Each participant received a packet, containing basic background information for each job announcement (i.e., the date that the application materials were sent, whether there was a contact person and the contact person's name), and the business correspondence sent by the organization. For each business correspondence, participants were asked to respond, using a 7-point agreement scale with the extreme anchors of 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree, to two items assessing their impression of the organization: The business correspondence left a positive impression of the organization; I believe that the business correspondence practices of this organization are of a professional nature. The alpha reliability of the impression scale was .87. Participants also responded to an item assessing their likelihood of re-applying to the organization: I would apply for another job with this organization in the future, and to a reverse-coded item assessing their likelihood of patronizing the organization: I would be less likely to patronize this organization in the future. Participants responded to these items with the 7-point agreement scale.

RESULTS

It was hypothesized that rejection letters received after a long time interval and rejection letters that failed to explicitly state that the applicant was not selected for the position opening would result in a more negative impression of the organization, and would reduce the likelihood

of the applicant re-applying to the organization and patronizing the organization. In addition, these relationships were expected to be moderated by the presence of a contact person, such that sending an application to a contact person would result in more extreme negative reactions.

For each dependent variable (positive impression of the organization, likelihood of re-applying, likelihood of patronizing), a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted with contact person (no, yes), explicit decision (no, yes), and time interval (short, medium, long) as independent variables. The results of the ANOVA for positive impression of the organization are presented in Table 1. Main effects were found for contact person and time. When application materials had been sent to a contact person, the impression mean was 4.20 ($SD = .73$); when materials had not been sent to a contact person, 4.52 ($SD = .90$), such that respondents had a more negative impression of the organization when a contact person existed. Means for short, medium, and long time intervals were 4.31 ($SD = 1.02$), 4.51 ($SD = 1.00$), and 4.22 ($SD = .95$), respectively, with a significant difference between the mean of the long time interval, compared to the short and medium intervals $p < .05$, such that the long time interval resulted in the most negative impression.

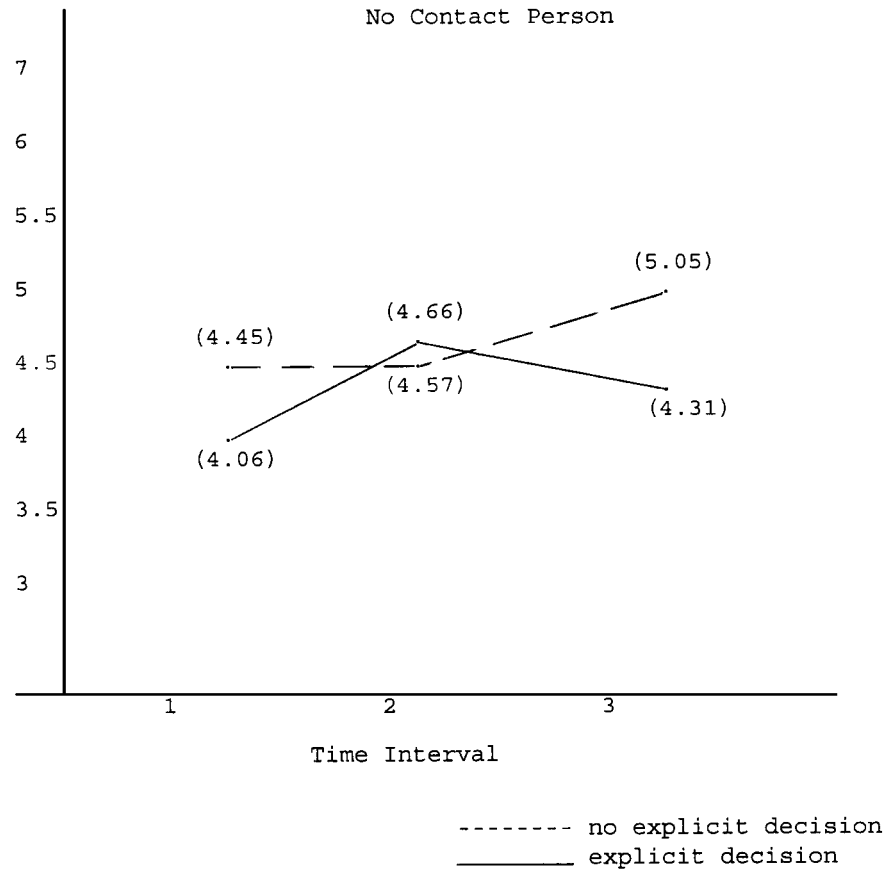
A three-way interaction among contact person, explicitly stated decision, and time interval was found. The form of the interaction is presented in Figures 1a and 1b. Figure 1a reveals that the most positive impression resulted when no contact person existed and when the rejection letter was received after a long time interval, with no explicit statement of rejection ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.60$). Figure 1b reveals that the most negative impressions resulted when there was a contact person who sent the letter after a long time interval, with no explicitly stated rejection decision ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.60$).

Table 1
ANOVA Results for Contact Person, Explicit Statement of Rejection Decision, and Time Interval Between Application and Rejection Letter, Predicting Impression of the Organization

Independent Variable	df	F	Omega ²
Contact Person (A)	1, 55	10.85**	.15
Explicit Decision (B)	1, 55	1.80	.01
Time Interval (C)	2, 110	3.19*	.04
Contact by Decision	1, 55	31.22**	.35
Contact by Time	2, 110	10.82**	.15
Decision by Time	2, 110	2.54	.03
A by B by C	2, 110	18.09**	.23

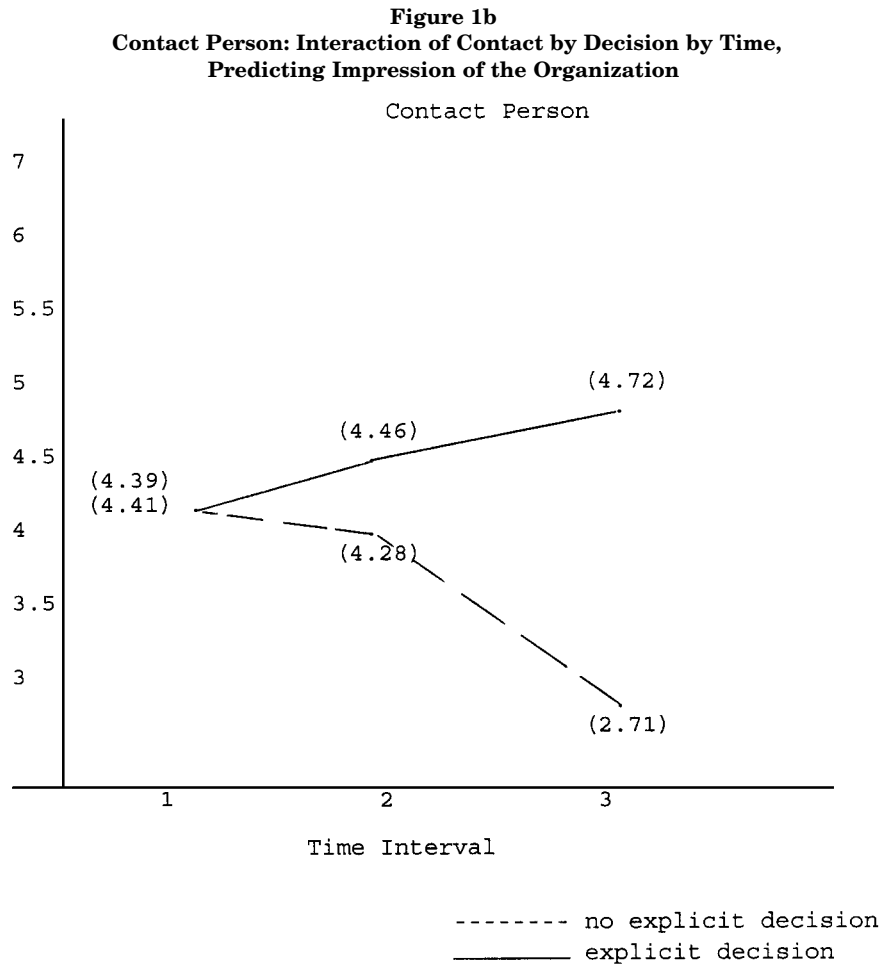
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Figure 1a
No Contact Person: Interaction of Contact, by Decision by Time,
Predicting Impression of the Organization



Results of the ANOVA assessing willingness to re-apply to a rejecting organization are presented in Table 2. Significant main effects were found for contact person, and explicitly stated decision. However, a time main effect was not significant. For the contact person condition a mean of 4.34 ($SD = .88$) was found; for the no contact person condition, 4.68 ($SD = 1.04$). Thus, the existence of a contact person reduced the likelihood of re-applying to the organization. For the explicitly stated decision condition the mean was 4.43 ($SD = 1.00$); for no explicitly stated decision, 4.60 ($SD = .99$), such that an explicit statement of rejection included in the letter, reduced the likelihood of re-applying.

A three-way interaction among time interval, explicitly stated decision, and contact person was found. The form of the interaction is pre-



sented in Figures 2a and 2b. Figure 2a reveals that the greatest likelihood of re-applying to the organization resulted when there was no contact person, and a rejection letter was sent after a long time interval with no explicitly stated decision ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.59$). Figure 2b reveals that the least likelihood of re-applying occurred when a contact person sent the rejection letter after a long time interval, with no explicit statement of rejection ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.65$).

Results of a third ANOVA, assessing willingness to patronize a rejecting organization, are presented in Table 3. Significant main effects were not found for contact person, explicitly stated decision, or time. However, a significant three-way interaction was found. Figures 3a and 3b depict the interaction. As is apparent upon inspection of Figures 3a

Table 2
ANOVA Results for Contact Person, Explicit Statement of Rejection Decision,
and Time Interval Between Application and Rejection Letter,
Predicting Likelihood of Re-Applying

Independent Variable	df	F	Omega ²
Contact Person (A)	1, 64	17.08**	.20
Explicit Decision (B)	1, 64	3.82*	.04
Time Interval (C)	2, 128	.72	.00
Contact by Decision	1, 64	12.28**	.15
Contact by Time	2, 128	8.19**	.10
Decision by Time	2, 128	14.75**	.17
A by B by C	2, 128	23.08**	.25

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

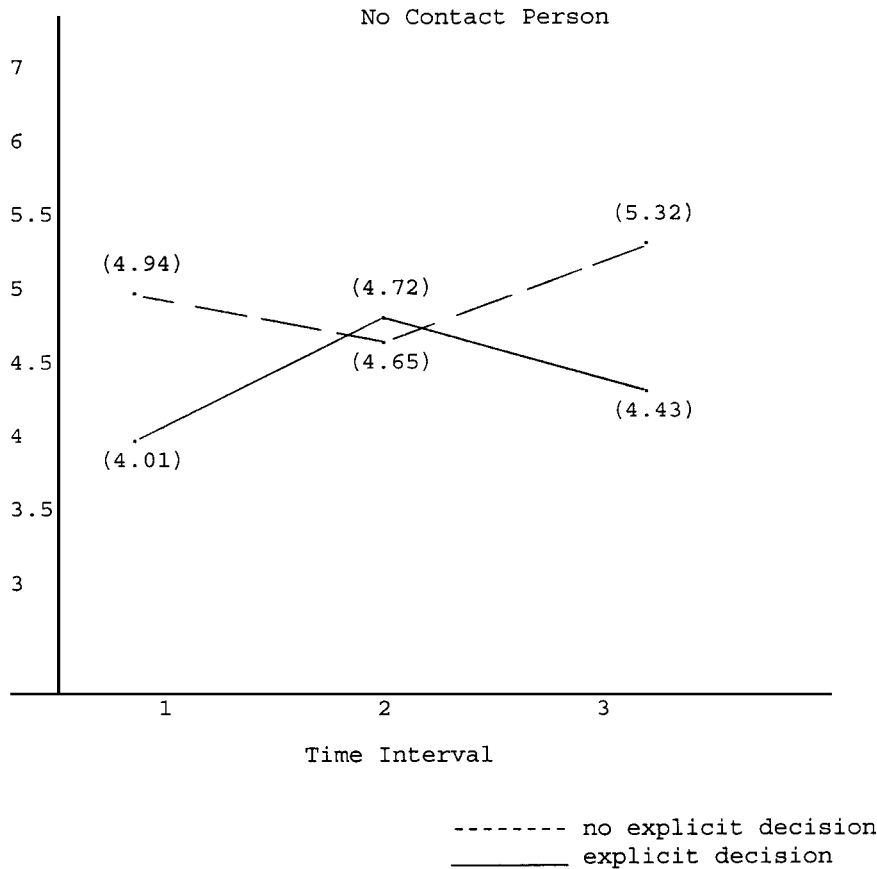
and 3b, the situation that resulted in the greatest likelihood of patronizing the organization was one in which there was no contact person, and the rejection letter was sent after a long time interval with no explicit statement of rejection ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.59$). In contrast, the situation that resulted in the least likelihood of patronizing the organization was one in which there was a contact person, and the rejection letter was sent after a long time interval with no explicit statement of rejection ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.37$).

Main effects for explicitly stated decision and time interval were not found consistently across the dependent variable measures. Specifically, people responded to the long time interval with a more negative impression of the organization. However, time interval had no effect on likelihood of re-applying to or of patronizing the organization. Thus, Hypothesis 1 received partial support. Counter to Hypothesis 2, rejection letters with explicit statements of rejection resulted in less likelihood of re-applying to the organization. As predicted by Hypothesis 3, support was found for the moderating role of the presence or absence of a contact person for each of the dependent variables (impression, likelihood of re-applying, likelihood of patronizing the organization).

DISCUSSION

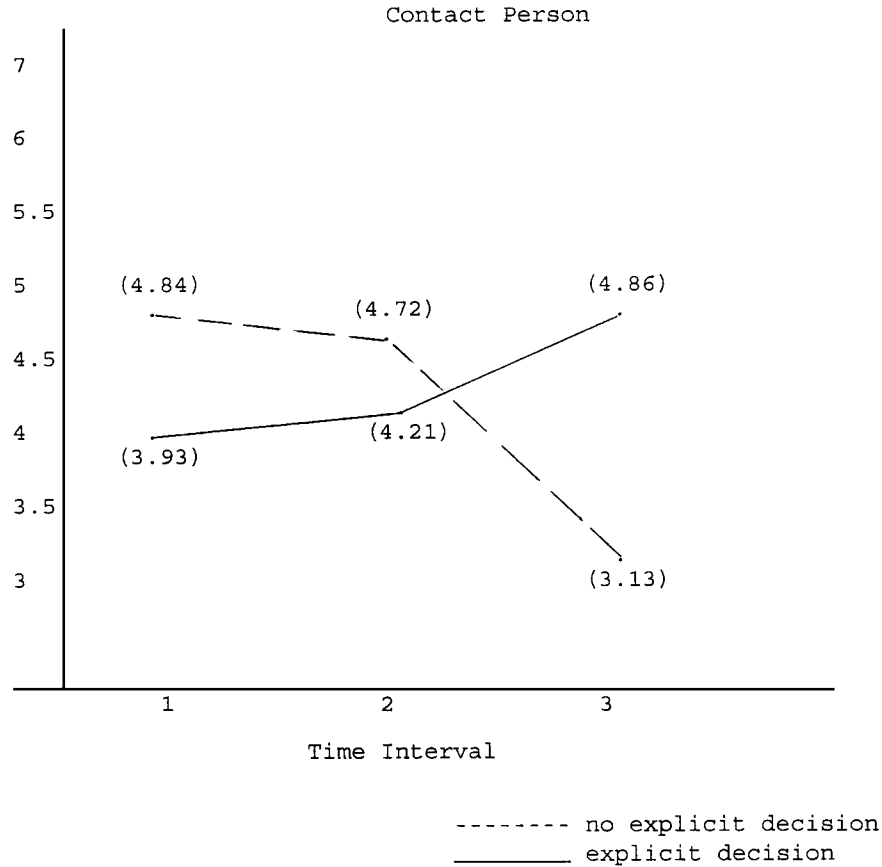
While caution must be taken when drawing conclusions from a study in which participants responded to hypothetical situations, the results of the study support the idea that rejection letter characteristics influence applicant impressions and behaviors. Thus, our findings are consistent with those of Aamodt and Peggans (1988), and Feinberg et al. (1996).

Figure 2a
No Contact Person: Interaction of Contact by Decision by Time,
Predicting Likelihood of Re-Applying



Interestingly, our results suggest that a long time interval before receiving a rejection letter, and rejection letters with no explicit statement of rejection resulted in negative reactions only when application materials had been sent to a contact person. In the absence of a contact person, respondents reacted more positively when no explicit statement of rejection was included in the rejection letter. Perhaps, as Brown (1993) noted, such letters are ambiguous, making it unclear to the recipient as to whether or not a rejection occurred. Such a situation might cause letter recipients to respond in a positive manner, because they are unaware that they have been rejected. Alternately, a clear statement of rejection may contribute to the negative tone of the letter, resulting in, as demonstrated by Feinberg et al. (1996) more negative reactions from recipients.

Figure 2b
Contact Person: Interaction of Contact by Decision by Time,
Predicting Likelihood of Re-Applying



In the absence of a contact person, respondents reacted more positively to the long time interval. We operationalized the long time interval as 31 or more days before receiving a response from the organization. This time interval may not have been viewed by respondents as a long period of time. Future research should examine applicant perceptions regarding reasonable and unreasonable time intervals as they proceed through the application process.

We found the extreme difference in results depending on the existence or nonexistence of a contact person compelling. Perhaps, the existence of a contact person incurred in applicants a sense of obligation on the part of the organization. According to Robinson and Rousseau (1994), when a psychological contract is violated, responses are likely to be more

Table 3
ANOVA Results for Contact Person, Explicit Statement of Rejection Decision,
and Time Interval Between Application and Rejection Letter,
Predicting Likelihood of Patronizing the Organization

Independent Variable	df	F	Omega ²
Contact Person (A)	1, 66	1.15	.00
Explicit Decision (B)	1, 66	.86	.00
Time Interval (C)	2, 132	2.68	.02
Contact by Decision	1, 66	4.57*	.05
Contact by Time	2, 132	2.57	.02
Decision by Time	2, 132	3.92*	.04
A by B by C	2, 132	9.59**	.11

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

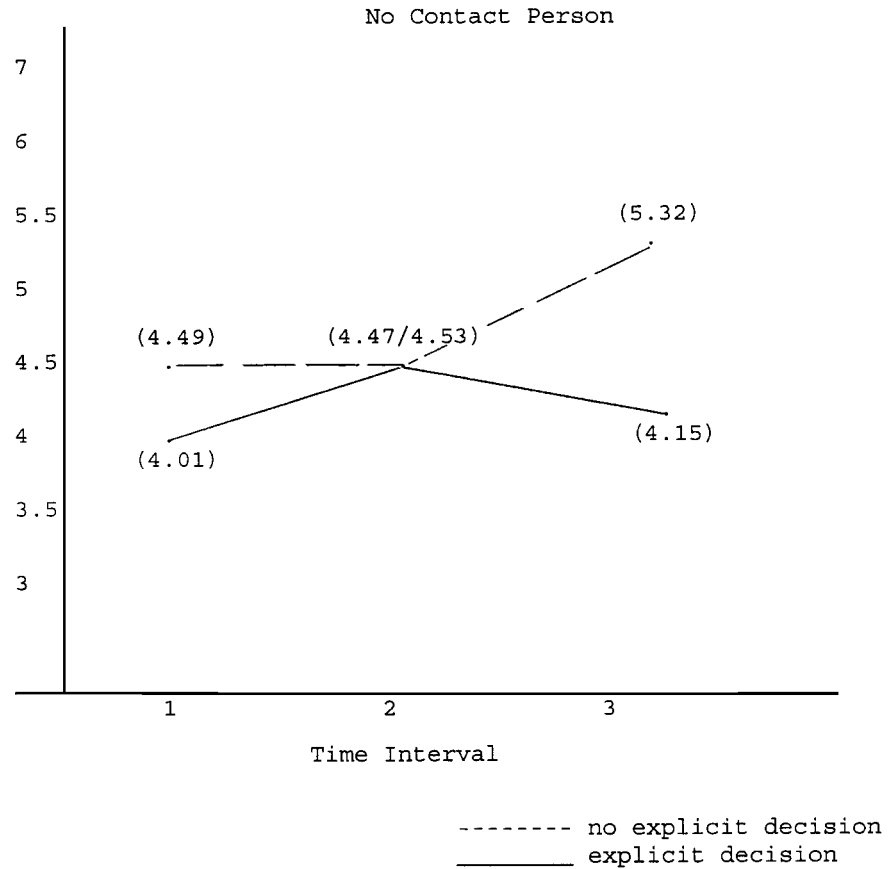
intense compared to when expectations are unfulfilled. The intensity of the reaction is due not only to unmet expectations, but also to general beliefs regarding respect for persons, codes of conduct, and other behaviors associated with relationships (Rousseau, 1989). We speculate that a contact person may have increased the likelihood of psychological contract formation, and that such contracts may have been violated in the absence of timely, clear communication of the rejection decision. To examine further the idea that psychological contracts may develop during the application process, the extent to which the failure to receive a rejection letter was perceived as a psychological contract violation was tested in Study 2.

STUDY 2

A psychological contract is “an individual’s beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party” (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994, p. 246). Psychological contracts are based on beliefs regarding reciprocal obligations. Such contracts are promissory (i.e., promise future behavior) and reciprocal (Rousseau, 1990). Explicit promises are not necessary for psychological contract formation (Rousseau, 1990), but may develop based on inferences and past experience (Weick, 1981).

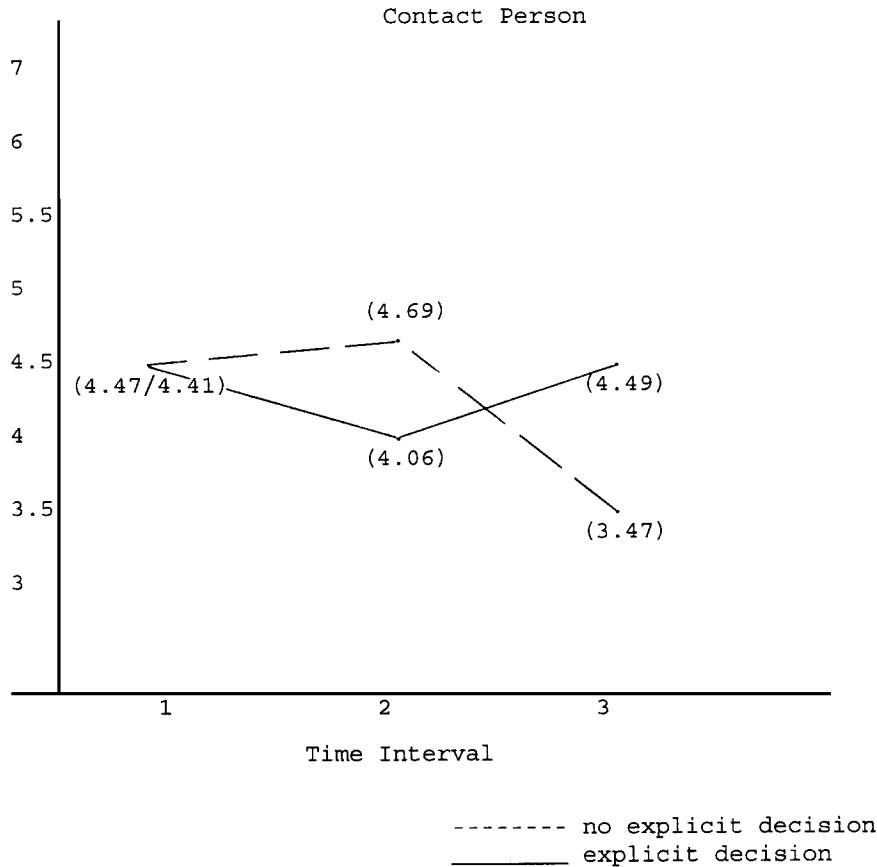
Psychological contracts have been found to form during the recruitment process. Specifically, Rousseau (1990) found that applicants who had recently accepted job offers possessed beliefs regarding the reciprocal obligation between themselves and their employers. In the present study, we argue that psychological contracts (albeit, short term ones)

Figure 3a
No Contact Person: Interaction of Contact by Decision by Time,
Predicting Likelihood of Patronizing the Organization



may exist even in the absence of job offers. In particular, the act of applying for a job results in a short term relationship between employer and applicant. Such a relationship is both promissory and reciprocal in that the applicant expects some future behavior from the organization (e.g., review the applicant's materials, decide whether to hire the applicant, hire the applicant, contact the applicant with the decision to hire or reject) and that the applicant has invested time and effort into the application process and expects the organization to do likewise. When an organization fails to notify an unsuccessful job applicant that he or she was not selected for a particular position, the applicant may perceive that contract violation has occurred.

Figure 3b
Contact Person: Interaction of Contact by Decision by Time,
Predicting Likelihood of Patronizing the Organization



Hypothesis 1: Applicants who failed to receive a rejection letter from a rejecting organization will be more likely to report that the organization did not fulfill its obligations, and that it did not reciprocate in the amount of time and effort expended, compared to applicants who received rejection letters.

Negative reactions to contract violation may be due to unmet expectations of specific benefits or rewards. They also may be due to general beliefs about respect for persons, codes of conduct, and other patterns of behavior associated with relationships (Rousseau, 1989). In the context of a rejecting organization, specific benefits or rewards would not be expected by applicants. However, more general beliefs involving respect for

persons, codes of conduct, and other patterns of behavior associated with relationships would be expected. As such, when applicants do not receive a rejection letter they are expected to perceive the organization as being less courteous and respectful.

Hypothesis 2: Applicants who failed to receive a rejection letter from a rejecting organization will be more likely to report that the organization was less courteous and respectful, compared to applicants who received rejection letters.

METHOD

Participants

Thirty-five students, enrolled in a part-time MBA program located in the midwestern U.S., participated in the study. Thirty-five percent of the sample were female, and eight percent of the sample were minorities. Students were employed full-time with the three most common industries of employment being: Automotive (46%), finance (17%), and marketing (8%).

Procedure

Participants were asked to recall their reactions to their most recent job search experience. They were told to respond based on their reactions to an organization that had *failed to hire them and failed to send a rejection letter*, and based on an organization that had *failed to hire them and sent a rejection letter*. They were asked to indicate: (1) how well, overall, the organization fulfilled the obligations they owed you (1 = very poorly fulfilled; 5 = very well fulfilled); (2) who put in more time and effort during the application process (1 = I put in more effort; 5 = the organization put in more effort); (3) the amount of respect the organization showed you during the application process (1 = very little respect; 5 = a great deal of respect); and (4) the amount of courtesy that the organization showed you during the application process (1 = very little courtesy; 5 = a great deal of courtesy). Item 1 was adapted from Robinson and Rousseau's (1994) measure of contract violation.

RESULTS

To assess differences in reactions to a rejecting organization who sent a rejection letter and one that failed to send a rejection letter, a MANOVA was completed with letter/no letter as the independent vari-

able, and reactions to the four questionnaire items as repeated measure dependent variables. The multivariate test of significance indicated a difference in reactions to a rejecting organization that had sent a letter compared to one that had not ($F(4, 30) = 11.11, p < .01$). A univariate test was significant for the degree to which the organization fulfilled its obligations ($F(1, 33) = 46.25, p < .01$) with a rejection letter mean of 3.41 ($SD = .99$) and a no rejection letter mean of 1.97 ($SD = .90$). However, the univariate test regarding reciprocity of effort did not reach statistical significance ($F(1, 33) = 2.98, p > .05$), with a rejection letter mean of 2.32 ($SD = .88$) and a no rejection letter mean of 2.00 ($SD = .85$). Perceptions regarding respect for the applicant ($F(1, 33) = 23.41, p < .01$) and courtesy to the applicant ($F(1, 33) = 34.11, p < .01$) significantly differed by condition. When a rejection letter was sent, respective means for respect and courtesy were: 3.47 ($SD = .90$) and 3.32 ($SD = .98$). When a rejection letter was not sent respective means for respect and courtesy were: 2.38 ($SD = .95$) and 2.06 ($SD = .92$).

DISCUSSION

We sought to determine whether the failure to receive a rejection letter from a rejecting organization is viewed by job applicants as a violation of a psychological contract. Participants perceived the failure to receive a rejection letter as a failure on the part of the organization to fulfill its obligations, and perceived the organization that failed to send a rejection letter as less courteous and respectful of applicants. However, perceptions of reciprocity of time and effort did not differ based on whether the rejecting organization sent a rejection letter or not. All rejected applicants tended to believe that they invested more time and effort in the application process than the organization.

These results provide some support for the claim that the failure to receive a rejection letter from a rejecting organization may result in psychological contract violation. However, these findings must be interpreted with caution. The data are based on retrospective reports of participant reactions. In addition, in some instances applicants may have been rejected by multiple organizations, receiving rejection letters from some of the rejecting organizations and not from others. In such cases, applicants themselves selected the organization upon which to base their responses (e.g., their most recent rejection, the least professional organization).

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of these two studies support the idea that rejection letters are important in terms of their impact on applicant perceptions and

behaviors. The failure to send rejection letters may result in negative organizational consequences. Moreover, even when rejection letters are sent, the timing of the letter, the content of the letter, and the presence or absence of a contact person affect the impact of the letter. In particular, given the existence of a contact person, failing to send an explicit rejection letter in a timely manner to rejected applicants may harm an organization's image, applicant pool, and customer base.

Although practitioners cannot afford to alienate future applicants and potential customers by failing to send rejection letters, many do. For example, Brice and Waung (1995) found that 62% of organizations failed to send rejection letters to a rejected applicant, and in some cases rejection letters were not sent even after several interviews. At best, organizations should send prompt, explicitly stated rejection letters to rejected applicants. If this is not feasible due to a large number of applicants or an extended search period, organizations might do well to avoid providing applicants with the name of a contact person. Alternately, they might solicit applications through blind advertisements (i.e., the name of the hiring organization is not included in the advertisement).

Research is needed to more clearly determine if, how, and when psychological contracts develop during the application process. Future research should include direct measures of unmet expectations and of contract violation so that the mediating role of unfulfilled expectations and psychological contract violation on reactions to rejection letter characteristics may be examined. In addition, the impact of various rejection letter characteristics (e.g., letter length, statements about the rejected applicant's skills) on actual job applicants as they participate in a job search should be examined.

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APPENDIX
REJECTION LETTER WITH NO EXPLICIT STATEMENT
OF REJECTION

Dear Mr. Abbey:

Thank you for responding to our recent recruitment effort for our position opening. We received many inquiries about the position, and like yours, they offered a wide range of academic preparation, work experience, and commitment to work excellence.

We believe several of the candidates offer the mix of skills, expertise, and experience we are looking for and wish you well in your career.

Sincerely,

Chris Appelton

REJECTION LETTER WITH EXPLICIT STATEMENT
OF REJECTION

Dear Mr. Abbey:

Thank you for your application for our recent position opening.

Although your academic background and experience are impressive, we filled the position with someone whom we felt was a better match.

Again, thank you for applying. We wish you all the luck in your current job search.

Sincerely,

Lee Matthews