Employee recruitment: Current knowledge and important areas for future research

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Over the last forty years, research on employee recruitment has increased dramatically. In this paper, I review research on recruitment topics that have received considerable attention (e.g., recruitment methods, realistic job previews). I also address topics (e.g., targeted recruitment, the site visit) that have received relatively little attention but that have the potential to be quite important. In examining these topics, job applicant variables (e.g., self-insight), that should influence how an employer conducts the recruitment process but that have frequently been neglected, are discussed. Throughout the paper, important areas for future research are suggested.

The attention given to the topic of employee recruitment by researchers has increased considerably in recent years (Billsberry, 2007; Breaugh, Macan, & Grambow, 2008). Given the importance of the recruitment process, such attention is clearly warranted. In addition to an increase in the number of studies being published, there has been an increase in the variety of recruitment topics being examined. For example, as discussed by Saks (2005), much of the early research focused on the use of realistic job previews (i.e., providing job applicants with accurate information about what a position with an organization involves), traditional recruitment methods (e.g., newspaper advertisements), and recruiter characteristics (e.g., their behavior). More recently, research has shifted from these three areas and has begun to explore such topics as the timing of recruitment actions, recruit site visits, and on-line recruiting (e.g., Boswell, Roehling, LePine, & Moylan, 2003; Dineen, Ling, Ash, & DelVecchio, 2007).

Given the multitude of topics that have been addressed by researchers and the large number of studies that have been published, I have not attempted to provide a comprehensive review of the recruitment literature in this paper. Instead, in reviewing past research on a topic (e.g., a site visit), my goals are to provide the reader with a sense of the current state of our knowledge and to point out limitations of prior research that may have resulted in erroneous conclusions being drawn. Having noted such limitations, I highlight important directions for future research. In reviewing recruitment research, I have tried to be provocative. My hope is that such an approach will stimulate important needed research. For example, having examined research on realistic job previews (RJPs), I suggest that methodological weaknesses of past studies have resulted in the benefits of RJPs being underestimated. In addition, in a number of places in this paper, I cite research from fields that have largely been ignored in reviews of recruitment research but which offer promise in trying to better understand the recruitment process. For example, in reviewing research on the use of employee referrals as a recruitment method, I draw upon studies by sociologists which are not typically cited by human resource management (HRM) researchers. Before beginning my review of the recruitment literature, three issues need to be addressed: (a) the focus of this paper on external recruitment, (b) the relative importance of recruitment vis-à-vis position attributes, and (c) the influence of organizational characteristics.

In terms of the focus of this article, I primarily address the external recruitment of individuals. With regard to term external recruitment, I define it as encompassing an employer’s actions that are intended to: (a) bring a job opening to the attention of
potential job candidates who do not currently work for the organization, (b) influence whether these individuals apply for the opening, (c) affect whether they maintain interest in the position until a job offer is extended, and (d) influence whether a job offer is accepted. Although readers who are familiar with internal recruitment (e.g., supervisors nominating their employees for positions vs. current employees applying via a job posting system) should see immediate parallels to some of the external recruitment topics discussed herein (e.g., the use of employee referrals vs. job advertisements), space constraints do not allow for an adequate treatment of internal recruitment.

With regard to the relative importance of recruitment vis-à-vis position characteristics, conventional wisdom (Rynes & Cable, 2003) is that position attributes such as pay, job tasks, and work hours are more important to job applicants than such recruitment variables as the content of a job advertisement, the design of a company’s employment web site, or a recruiter’s behavior. Comparisons of the relative impact of recruitment variables and position attributes have resulted in some individuals questioning whether the manner in which an employer recruits is important. In this context, two factors should be considered. First, if an employer does a poor job of recruiting, it may not bring job openings to the attention of the type of persons it seeks to recruit (e.g., employed individuals who are not actively searching for new positions). Secondly, even if a position is brought to the attention of targeted individuals, poor treatment during the recruitment process (e.g., a poorly run site visit) may result in individuals withdrawing as job candidates before an employer has had a chance to even present a job offer (Boswell et al., 2003; Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991).

The final topic meriting attention before beginning my review of recruitment research involves organizational characteristics (e.g., location, industry). As noted by Rynes and Cable (2003), organizational characteristics can be important in a recruitment context both because individuals may be more attracted to employers with certain characteristics (e.g., Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005; documented that job applicants were more attracted to larger employers) and because certain types of organizations are more likely to recruit in certain ways (e.g., Barber, Wesson, Roberson, & Taylor, 1999; found that larger employers were more likely to have HR staff dedicated to the recruitment function than smaller ones). Although I agree with Rynes and Cable that more attention to should be given to organizational characteristics, given their excellent review of the limited research that does exist, I will not review this research.

1. A model of the recruitment process

In most reviews of recruitment research, authors (e.g., Rynes & Cable, 2003) have offered organizing models of the recruitment process. Fig. 1 presents a model from a chapter by Breaugh et al. (2008). Given the detailed nature of this model, I will not provide a thorough discussion of all of its contents. However, a few components of the model do merit elaboration. Fig. 1 suggests that, before making decisions concerning such issues as what recruitment methods to use, an organization should thoughtfully establish its recruitment objectives. For example, until an employer decides upon the type of individuals it seeks to attract as job applicants...

Fig. 1. A model of the recruitment process (reprinted with permission, from Breaugh et al., 2008).
(e.g., type of work experience, level of education), it is difficult for it to make optimal decisions about how to bring a job opening to their attention. Fig. 1 lists several possible recruitment objectives an employer might have. Some of these involve pre-hire objectives such as filling a certain number of job openings and attracting applications from certain types of individuals. Other objectives are post-hire in nature (e.g., attracting individuals who will perform at a certain level, recruiting individuals who will have a certain retention rate).

Having established recruitment objectives, an organization should be able to develop a coherent strategy for filling open positions. As detailed in Fig. 1, among the questions an employer might address in establishing a recruitment strategy are: (a) When to begin recruiting? (b) What message to communicate to potential job applicants? and (c) Whom to use as recruiters? The answers to these and other strategy-oriented questions (see Fig. 1) obviously should be consistent with the recruitment objectives previously established.

Having carefully considered the strategy-oriented questions listed in Fig. 1, an organization next would carry out recruitment activities (e.g., posting job openings on job boards such as Monster.com, hosting receptions at college campuses) suggested by the strategy upon which it has decided. The final stage of the recruitment process involves an evaluation of recruitment results. More specifically, an employer should compare its recruitment objectives (i.e., what it hoped to accomplish) against its recruitment outcomes (i.e., what it actually accomplished). Doing such should allow the employer to learn from its experiences so that it can more effectively recruit in the future (this learning is reflected by the feedback arrows in Fig. 1).

A key part of Fig. 1 is the box labeled “Intervening Job Applicant Variables”. Although some of these variables (e.g., what makes a position attractive) have received attention, many other variables (e.g., attracting applicant attention, applicant self-insight) have received almost no attention from recruitment researchers (Breaugh et al., 2008). A consideration of the job applicant variables portrayed in Fig. 1 should play a central role in how an employer plans its recruitment process. For example, if an employer is interested in attracting the attention of individuals who are not currently looking for jobs, many commonly used (and commonly studied) recruitment methods (e.g., newspaper advertisements, job fairs) may not be particularly effective. Similarly, if an organization hopes to improve person–job/organization fit by providing realistic information during the recruitment process, applicant self-insight is important to consider (without such insight, even having received the information, an applicant may not be able to evaluate whether the position described represents a good fit).

Given the importance of these job applicant variables, I will return to them in addressing numerous recruitment variables throughout the remainder of this paper. At this point, it is sufficient to state that research (see Breaugh et al., 2008; Rynes & Cable, 2003) has found that many job applicants: (a) have an incomplete and/or inaccurate understanding of what a job opening involves, (b) are not sure what they want from a position, (c) do not have a self-insight with regard to their knowledge, skills, and abilities, and (d) cannot accurately predict how they will react to the demands of a new position.

Before beginning my review of recruitment research, two remaining issues (i.e., the type of outcomes studied, the type of individuals studied) should be mentioned. As noted earlier, some of the recruitment objectives listed in Fig. 1 involve pre-hire outcomes an employer desires and other objectives involve post-hire outcomes that are sought. As discussed by Saks (2005), although most recruitment efforts are focused on attaining particular pre-hire objectives, in many areas of research (e.g., studies of recruitment methods), post-hire outcomes have been the primary focus. One of the reasons so much attention has been given to post-hire outcomes is because the samples used in many studies have been comprised of recently hired employees. Yet, if one examines the theoretical rationale that has been offered for the effectiveness of various recruitment activities (e.g., the use of employee referrals results in job applicants who are of higher quality than the applicants generated from many other recruitment methods), it is apparent that more attention should be focused on applicants than has been the case. Furthermore, if one considers the definition of external recruitment offered earlier, it is evident that even focusing upon applicants as a sample may be too limited in some cases. For example, if a recruitment campaign is intended to bring a job opening to the attention of potential applicants and influence whether they submit applications, it is important to have data on those individuals who were made aware of a job opening and whether an application was forthcoming. I will return to the issues of the type of recruitment outcomes assessed and the type of individuals studied as research on various topics (e.g., recruitment methods) is reviewed.

Having provided a general introduction to the recruitment literature, I now turn to what Saks (2005) referred as the “3 R’s” (i.e., realistic job previews, recruitment methods, and recruiter behaviors) of recruitment research, the three topics he believes have attracted the most attention from researchers. Each of these topics is addressed in considerable detail given that principles underlying their potential importance are also relevant to other topics (e.g., job advertisements) that are addressed later in this paper.

2. Research on realistic job previews

2.1. Past research on realistic job previews

Research evaluating the effects of realistic job previews (RJPs) has more than a 50-year history (Breaugh, 1992). The basic premise upon which the use of an RJP is based is that many job applicants have inaccurate perceptions of positions for which they are applying. Given many employers try to make themselves appear to be a good place to work (Billsberry, 2007), these applicant expectations generally are inflated. If hired, individuals possessing inflated job expectations are thought to be more likely to become dissatisfied with their positions and more likely to quit than applicants who have more accurate expectations (Breaugh & Starke, 2000).
As a way to address inaccurate job expectations, it has been suggested that an employer should provide recruits with candid information concerning a job opening (i.e., information about both positive and negative job and organizational attributes). Typically, RJPs have been provided by means of short videos or booklets (Phillips, 1998). By providing an RJP, those individuals who do not perceive a good person–job/organization fit are able to withdraw from job consideration. Thus, those RJP recipients who remain in the applicant pool, if hired, should experience what they expected which, in turn, should result in such outcomes as employee satisfaction, retention, and a sense that the organization was open and honest with them during the recruitment process (Breaugh & Starke, 2000).

Given the logic underlying why RJPs should influence variables such as voluntary turnover, the results of many RJP studies have been disappointing. For example, Wanous (1973) did not find a difference in voluntary turnover between his RJP and control groups for his sample of 80 applicants for the job of telephone operator. In their study of baggers and checkers in grocery stores, Dugoni and Ilgen (1981) found only a marginally significant RJP effect (p < .10) on voluntary turnover even with a large sample (N = 160).

In an attempt to explain such unexpected results, Breaugh (1983) discussed conditions under which an RJP is likely to be most effective. Two conditions cited were that job applicants had unrealistically positive expectations prior to receiving an RJP, and they had the ability to remove themselves from job consideration if a position did not appear desirable. With regard to job expectations, it is difficult to estimate how accurate applicants’ expectations were in most studies. For example, neither Wanous (1973) nor Dugoni and Ilgen (1981) measured the accuracy of the initial (i.e., pre-RJP) job expectations held by the applicants in their study. However, given how visible the jobs of grocery store checker and bagger are to the public, it seems reasonable to assume that, compared to many recruitment situations, applicants in Dugoni and Ilgen’s study possessed accurate job expectations (it is harder to estimate whether applicants in Wanous’s study had accurate initial expectations). In neither the Wanous study nor the Dugoni and Ilgen study was applicant ability to self-select out of job consideration measured. However, given in Wanous’ study less than 2% of the applicants offered jobs declined them and less than 1% of those in Dugoni and Ilgen’s study declined offers, it seems likely that at least some applicants did not have other job options.

In summary, in both the Wanous (1973) and the Dugoni and Ilgen (1981) studies, it appears that RJPs were used in situations which were likely to minimize their effects. These studies are not anomalies. For example, in a study of applicants for bank teller positions, Colarelli (1984) compared the voluntary turnover of individuals in a control condition against those who received an RJP booklet (more will be said about this study shortly). Contrary to what he predicted, Colarelli found no turnover difference. However, in interpreting this finding, it is important to consider whether applicants had reasonably accurate expectations concerning the teller position given its visibility to the public even without receiving an RJP. It is also important to consider that every applicant regardless of condition who received a job offer accepted it (Did applicants perceive an ability to self-select out of job consideration?).

In contrast to the preceding three studies, consider an RJP study that Mary Suszko and I (Suszko & Breaugh, 1986) conducted of applicants for an inventory taker position. In order to estimate whether job applicants had unrealistic expectations and the ability to self-select out of job consideration, we gathered survey data after six weeks on the job. On several of the factual items used, new employees in our control group reported having had unrealistic expectations prior to beginning work. In order to measure ability to self-select out of job consideration, we asked “If you had not taken this job, how easy would it have been for you to find another one just as good?” On a scale in which “4” represented “easy” and “5” represented “very easy”, the mean response was 4.11. In summary, it appears that our study examined RJP effects in a situation in which an RJP was likely to have a sizable impact.

As hypothesized, we found that RJP recipients were more likely to decline job offers than those in the control condition (p < .05). More specifically, 4 of 15 RJP recipients (27%) turned down job offers. In contrast, none of the 13 individuals in the control condition rejected a job offer. With regard to voluntary turnover measured after three months on the job, the turnover rate for the RJP condition was 36% (4 of 11 quit). In contrast, 11 of the 13 individuals in the control condition (85%) had quit (p < .05). Mary Suszko and I also found that, in comparison to those in the control group, RJP recipients reported greater job satisfaction and perceived the organization as being more open and honest with them. In summary, our results suggest that, when an RJP is used in conditions in which applicants lack realistic expectations and have the ability to turn down a job they did not see as attractive, an RJP could have powerful effects.

At this point, it is useful to consider the results of a meta-analysis conducted by Phillips (1998). She reported the average correlation between receiving an RJP and applicant withdrawal from the selection process was −.03. In terms of post-hire outcomes, Phillips reported that RJPs correlated −.06 with voluntary turnover, −.01 with job satisfaction, and .05 with a climate for honesty. In terms of magnitude, these are not impressive correlations.

The publication of Phillips’ (1998) meta-analysis appears to have had a dramatic influence on RJP research. For example, in introducing her paper, Phillips stated that “No recruitment issue has generated more attention than realistic job previews” (p. 873). Since her paper appeared, research on RJPs has declined dramatically. Phillips is not solely responsible for this diminished attention. For example, based upon their review of the RJP literature, Rynes and Cable (2003) concluded that “RJPs are associated with consistent, but very small, increases in employee retention” (p. 69). Similarly, in his chapter on recruitment, Saks (2005) concluded that “RJPs have a modest effect on turnover reduction” (p. 52). Given Phillips’ results and the unenthusiastic conclusions concerning RJPs by Rynes and Cable and by Saks, it is not surprising that research on RJPs has decreased. However, I believe a strong two-fold case can be made that the potential effectiveness of RJPs has been underestimated. The first issue that needs to be addressed concerns the studies included in Phillips’ meta-analyses. The second issue involves the manner in which RJPs have been implemented in most studies.
Concerning Phillips' (1998) article, a key issue that has received insufficient attention involves the studies included in her meta-analysis. In terms of conducting a meta-analysis, Hunter and Schmidt (2004) have provided an excellent discussion of what studies should be included. One topic they addressed is the issue of relevant versus irrelevant studies. They defined relevant studies “as those that focus on the relationship of interest” (p. 469). In this regard, one can question many of the studies that Phillips included in her meta-analysis. For example, of the 17 studies upon which her voluntary turnover RJP effect size was based, 10 (59%) were laboratory studies conducted with students. Are lab studies conducted with students relevant to whether the use of an RJP reduces turnover in a work setting? Another important factor to consider in evaluating the relevance of a study for inclusion in Phillips' meta-analysis is whether the RJP was administered. I would argue that providing an RJP to individuals who have already started work (e.g., providing an RJP during an orientation program) should not be considered a recruitment mechanism. Yet, in over 50% of the studies included in Phillips' voluntary turnover analysis, the RJP was provided after hiring. Another difficulty in drawing conclusions from Phillips' findings is she did not look at whether RJP effects differed in magnitude based on such things as the visibility of the job in question and applicants' ability to self-select out of job consideration. As discussed earlier, it appears that studies included in her analyses (e.g., Dugoni & Ilgen, 1981) may have included applicants who had realistic expectations and had little ability to self-select out of job consideration.

In summary, given Phillips' (1998) conclusion concerning the effect of an RJP on voluntary turnover ($r = -.06$) was based 17 studies (on only seven of which were conducted in the workplace) and many of the 17 studies had characteristics which were likely to underestimate an RJP's effect if used in a more typical recruitment circumstance (i.e., the RJP was given prior to hiring), it seems premature to conclude that RJP s have “very small” or “modest” effects. Rather, it seems prudent to withhold judgment on the effects of RJP s until more research has been conducted with real recruits who have unrealistic expectations and the ability to self-select out of job consideration if a position is not seen as a good fit.

2.2. Three important job applicant-related variables

Having encouraged future research on RJP s, it is important to highlight three job applicant-related variables (i.e., anchoring and adjustment, inability to predict how one will react to events in the future, and a lack of self-insight), that have rarely been discussed in the context of RJP s, but that merit attention. Concerning anchoring and adjustment, research in social psychology (see Kruglanski & Sleeth-Keppler, 2007) has found that, having formed an initial attitude concerning a topic, individuals typically do not sufficiently adjust this attitude after receiving additional relevant information. This suggests that providing an RJP to an applicant who already has an opinion of what a position with an employer involves may not result in an adequate adjustment of this initial opinion. Although some adjustment is better than none at all (i.e., even if an RJP doesn't lead to accurate expectations, they may be more accurate than if no RJP was provided), certain types of RJP s are likely to result in more adjustment than others. These RJP s will be discussed once the other two applicant-related variables are introduced.

Even if an employer tries to provide detailed information about an open position (e.g., “the job requires being on your feet all day”), the effectiveness of an RJP may be reduced if the applicants receiving the RJP lack experience with regard to the topic being addressed. In this regard, research in social psychology (see Dunning, 2007) has shown that people who are asked to predict how they will react to a future state of events with which they lack experience typically are unable to make accurate predictions. This inability to predict one's reaction is captured by the following quote from a new employee — “I had no idea how important windows were to me until I'd spent a week in a staff room without any” (Louis, 1980; p. 238). This inability to predict one's reactions means that, even if an organization provides descriptive information about what a job involves, an RJP recipient may have difficulty anticipating how he or she will react to various aspects of the new job. Breauh et al. (2008) have provided a detailed discussion of how this inability to predict one's reactions can at least partially be overcome if an RJP includes information that is both descriptive (i.e., factual) and judgmental (i.e., addresses the reactions other employees have to the job attributes). A final factor that can limit the effectiveness of an RJP is a lack of applicant self-insight concerning one's abilities or what one wants in a job. Baumeister, Schmeichel, and Vohs (2007) have provided a comprehensive summary of psychological research that has documented that individuals frequently lack self-insight. In particular, this research has shown that individuals typically have an inflated view of their abilities. Although over two decades ago Dobson (1989) highlighted how self-insight is critical for an RJP to be effective, such insight has rarely been addressed in discussions of RJP s. This lack of attention is surprising given it is so apparent that providing RJP information concerning job demands or job rewards will have a limited effect if a job candidate lacks self-insight (e.g., does not know how he or she will react to standing all day).

2.3. The potential effectiveness of less commonly used RJP approaches

In order to address the issues of anchoring and adjustment, inability to predict how one will react, and a lack of self-insight, it is important to consider the types of methods that have been used for providing RJP s. In most cases, RJP s have been conveyed by means of booklets or videos (Phillips, 1998). Although using booklets and videos is common, such one-way communication approaches may not be as effective as other approaches (e.g., a conversation) with regard to conveying information that is seen as personally relevant by an applicant. In this regard, consider the study by Colarelli (1984) that was mentioned earlier. He compared the effects of two types of RJP s (i.e., a conversation with a job incumbent, a 1500-word booklet) against a control group. Colarelli found the effects for the conversation were much stronger than those for the booklet. For example, the voluntary turnover rates at two months for his three groups were: conversation (13%), brochure (39%), and control group (28%). These are sizable differences especially given the position of bank teller is visible to the public and the 100% of those offered...
jobs accepted them (i.e., no self-selection occurred). Data reported by Colarelli suggest his turnover results may be due to the fact that individuals in the conversation condition felt they received more personally relevant information than those in the other two groups.

Despite the widespread use of RJP booklets and videos, Iles and Robertson (1989) advocated the use of work simulations. They felt that, compared to traditional RJPs, a simulation provides recruits with a better sense of what a job involves and with greater insight concerning their ability to do the job. Studies by Downs, Farr, and Colbeck (1978) and by Schmitt, Ford, and Stults (1986) support the value of work simulations for providing accurate job information and self-insight. Surprisingly, although researchers have noted the potential of a simulation for improving the accuracy of applicant expectations, such simulations have rarely been treated as an RJP (Callinan & Robertson, 2000).

Another RJP approach is providing a tour of the work site. Although authors (e.g., Breaugh, 1992) have discussed the potential value of such an approach for communicating realistic job information, none of the 40 studies included in Phillips’ (1998) meta-analyses involved visiting the work site. Yet, one can imagine that in many cases viewing a prospective work site would be highly informative. For example, such a tour could communicate information about the physical environment (e.g., temperature, noise), workforce demographics (e.g., do the people pictured in a recruitment brochure reflect the demographic composition observed?), and the degree of employee interaction (e.g., are people working alone or interacting with others?).

In the RJP literature, frequently the focus has been on the pros and cons of different ways (e.g., booklet vs. video) of providing an RJP. In this regard, I believe there is value in changing the focus from providing an RJP to the end result of applicants having realistic job expectations. This shift of perspective highlights the importance of utilizing multiple RJP approaches during the recruitment process. For example, realistic job information could initially be provided in a job advertisement and on a web site. This information could be added to during a telephone screening interview. For people who make it to a site visit, they could take part in a work simulation and a tour of the work site. Such a multi-step RJP approach makes particular sense, given no individual RJP approach is likely to overcome the three applicant-related variables discussed earlier. For example, a work site tour alone may not result in an applicant overcoming the anchoring and adjustment problem. Similarly, reading an RJP booklet may not result in a recruit being able to predict how he or she will react to various aspects of a position under consideration. Finally, a conversation is unlikely to provide an individual with adequate self-insight with regard to his/her ability to do the job (a work simulation would be more helpful). In contrast, if used in combination, multiple RJP approaches may help address these three applicant-related phenomena.

In concluding this discussion of RJPs, one final issue should be addressed. Although RJPs have been studied in terms of entry-level hiring, they also should be useful for internal recruitment. For example, a study by Caligiuri and Phillips (2003) described how an employer successfully used an RJP to help current employees make decisions concerning overseas assignments. Templer, Tay, and Chandrasekar (2006) also documented the effectiveness of an RJP in facilitating cross-cultural adjustment for employees transferred to non-U.S. assignments.

3. Research on recruitment methods

3.1. Traditional research on recruitment methods and limitations of this research

Over the years, researchers have focused considerable attention on the relative effectiveness of various recruitment methods (i.e., ways an employer tries to make individuals aware of job openings). For example, in one of the earlier studies, Gannon (1971) examined the relationship between several methods by which individuals heard about job openings at a bank and voluntary turnover. Among his findings were that individuals who were referred by a current employee or who had applied directly (“walk-ins”) without knowing if there were job openings were less likely to quit than individuals who responded to job advertisements or who were referred by an employment agency. Based upon their review of 21 recruitment method studies, Zottoli and Wanous (2000) concluded that, consistent with Gannon’s findings, the use of referrals and direct applicants were linked to lower voluntary turnover, but that these turnover effects tended to be small.

To date a number of explanations have been offered for why the type of recruitment method(s) an employer uses may make a difference. The two most common explanations (Zottoli & Wanous, 2000; discussed others) have been labeled the “realistic information” hypothesis and the “individual difference” hypothesis (Saks, 2005). Simply stated, the realistic information hypothesis suggests that individuals recruited via certain methods such as employee referrals have a more accurate understanding of what a position involves. The individual difference hypothesis posits that different recruitment methods may bring a job opening to the attention different types of individuals who vary on important attributes (e.g., ability, work ethic). For example, Williams, Labig, and Stone (1993) found that nurses who were referred by current employees of hospitals had more work experience than nurses recruited via job advertisements.

In recent years, reviews of the recruitment literature (e.g., Breaugh et al., 2008; Rynes & Cable, 2003) have pointed out weaknesses in most of the recruitment method studies that have been conducted. These limitations make it difficult to draw conclusions concerning recruitment method effects. For example, Rynes and Cable noted that most studies have focused on post-hire outcomes (e.g., turnover) rather than pre-hire outcomes (e.g., Do some recruitment approaches generate better applicants?) which are often of primary interest to an employer. Another limitation of most recruitment method studies is their use of samples of employees rather than job applicants. A problem with using employees is that an organization’s selection system may diminish initial differences among individuals recruited by different methods. For example, if employee referrals produce higher quality applicants, this difference could be eliminated by a selection system that screened out less qualified individuals. Thus, initial
applicant differences may not be apparent if the sample used is current employees. A weakness of some studies is what is treated as a recruitment method. For example, some researchers (e.g., Williams et al., 1993) have treated the rehiring of former employees as a recruitment method. Yet, these rehires could have heard of job openings at their former employer through employee referrals, job advertisements, etc. In essence, such studies have confounded differences due to recruitment methods with differences in the types of individuals recruited. A fourth limitation of some studies is their grouping of individuals recruited via different methods together. For example, Moser (2005) examined differences between internal recruitment approaches (i.e., employee referrals, rehires, internships, and in-house notices), external approaches (i.e., school placement offices, job ads, employment agencies), and walk-ins. Such a strategy can result in grouping individuals together who may differ on important variables (e.g., an employment agency may have screened for skills while no such screening may have taken place for those responding to a job advertisement). An additional deficiency of a few studies (e.g., Jattuso & Sinar, 2003) is they incorporated data on applicants from several employers into one sample. Thus, what appear to be recruitment method differences could result from organizational differences. Although other limitations could be cited, it suffices to state that the great majority of recruitment method studies suffer from one or more of the limitations noted.

3.2. Three studies that allow for clearer conclusions concerning recruitment method effects

To date, three studies that involved job applicants (as opposed to new employees), that presented data on specific methods used for recruiting (as opposed to grouping methods), and that only involved a single employer (as opposed to combining data gathered across employers) have been published. The first of these was a study by Kirnan, Farley, and Geisinger (1989) of applicants for positions as an insurance agent. In terms of assessing applicant quality, these researchers presented scores on a background questionnaire that had been shown to be predictive of success as an agent. Kirnan and her colleagues found applicants who were referred by current employees or who applied directly to the company had higher scores than individuals recruited via employment agencies, newspaper ads, or school placement offices. In terms of a job offer, referrals and those who applied directly were more likely to receive one than those utilizing more formal sources. A similar pattern was reported with regard to those who were hired.

Breaugh, Greising, Taggart, and Chen (2003) examined the relationship between five recruitment methods (i.e., employee referrals, direct applicants, college placement offices, job fairs, and newspaper ads) and pre-hire outcomes for applicants for information technology jobs. No difference was found for level of education or interview score. Not surprisingly, those recruited from college placement offices had less experience than applicants in the other groups. In terms of a job offer, employee referrals and direct applicants were more likely to receive one than those in the other groups. This pattern also held for those who were hired. In summary, although employee referrals and direct applicants did not differ from those in the other groups on two measures of applicant quality, they still were viewed as being more deserving of job offers.

The third study meeting the criteria (e.g., job applicants as a sample) noted earlier was conducted by Rafaeli, Hadomi, and Simons (2005). It involved a plant located in Israel and focused on three recruitment methods: employee referrals, geographically focused ads (i.e., the local newspaper), and geographically unfocused ads (i.e., a national newspaper). They found that referrals generated more applicants, more hires, and a higher yield ratio (hires/applicants) than geographically focused ads which, in turn, outperformed unfocused ads on these three criteria.

Considering the results of these three studies, the benefits of recruiting via employee referrals and receiving unsolicited applications are apparent. However, when one also considers the results of other recruitment method studies that have been conducted (e.g., those involving only employees, those that grouped recruitment methods together), results are less clear (“Results are very inconsistent across studies”, Rynes & Cable, 2003; p. 69).

3.3. Studies that focused specifically on the use of employee referrals

Although not typically discussed in reviews of research on recruitment methods, some interesting studies have been conducted by sociologists. Typically, these studies have compared applicants recruited via employee referrals against those recruited via all other methods combined. For example, Fernandez and Weinberg (1997) compared applicants referred by current employees of a bank against individuals recruited by other means. They predicted that referrals should have advantages at the interview stage and the job offer stage because they had been prescreened by the employees who made the referral and because they had received “difficult-to-obtain information” from the referrers about how best to prepare as an applicant. Fernandez and Weinberg found referred applicants had better computer and language skills as well as more bank experience and a higher level of education than non-referrals. Given these differences, it is not surprising that referrals were more likely to receive job offers. An interesting finding of this study was that, having statistically controlled for these pre-hire differences, referrals still were more likely to be interviewed and were more likely to receive job offers than non-referrals.

Fernandez, Castilla, and Moore (2000) conducted a study of applicants for call center jobs with a phone center. They predicted that, compared to non-referrals, referrals should be more qualified and be more likely to receive job offers. This prediction was partly based on a reputation protection mechanism (i.e., current employees would be hesitant to refer individuals about whom they had doubts) the authors discussed. This hypothesis was partially supported. For example, employee referrals had better work histories (e.g., more likely to be employed, longer tenure with previous employer) than non-referrals, but no difference was reported for education level. Fernandez et al. also found that referrals were more likely to be granted an interview and to receive job offers.
Castilla (2005) also conducted a study of call center employees. The primary focus of his study was on the performance of applicants who were hired. In particular, he was interested in performance differences over time and whether a referrer’s leaving would affect performance trends. As in several other studies, in this one, referrals were more likely to be hired than non-referrals. They also were more likely to complete a two-month long training program. With regard to measures of initial performance, Castilla predicted that the initial (i.e., average for first two months) performance of referrals should exceed that of non-referrals given referrals were more likely to receive coaching and pressure to perform from their referrers. These hypothesized initial performance differences were found. In order to remove the effects of human capital variables from the referral effect, Castilla statistically controlled for several variables (e.g., number of previous jobs, education level, computer knowledge). Having controlled for these variables, the initial performance effect remained. This residual initial performance effect could be due to the coaching and pressure referrals received and/or it could be due to human capital differences that were not captured by the control variables used. A unique aspect of Castilla’s study was his focus on performance trajectories. He found the initial performance difference between referrals and non-referrals gradually disappeared. Interestingly, Castilla also reported that, if the employee who did the referring left the organization, the performance trajectory of his/her referral was affected (i.e., did not rise at the rate for referrals whose referrer remained). He suggested this effect was due to the referral no longer feeling “a sense of obligation not to embarrass the referrer” (p. 1249).

Yakubovich and Lup (2006) conducted a study of independent contractors who worked for a virtual call center. They focused on three groups (i.e., those who became aware of jobs via the Internet, those who were referred by current employees who were high performers, and those who were referred by current employees who performed the job less well). For several reasons (e.g., current employees who are performing well should have more insight into what it takes to do the job well and hence should be more likely to refer job candidates who are better qualified for the position; better performing employees should value their reputations more), Yakubovich and Lupp hypothesized that individuals referred by higher performing employees should be viewed by HR as being of higher quality and should have higher scores on objective selection measures than referrals from less exceptional performers who, in turn, should be viewed more favorably and score higher than Internet recruits. These hypotheses were largely supported. These authors also found that either type of employee referrals was more likely to continue in the multi-stage selection process (i.e., less likely to self-select out) than Internet recruits, but that individuals referred by higher performers had a higher continuation rate.

At this point, I should address the considerable space that has been given to the use of employee referrals. This detailed coverage was based on two factors. First, many employers believe that employee referrals offer important advantages over other recruitment methods and therefore rely heavily on them for staffing their work forces. Second, many of the underlying principles extracted from the coverage of employee referrals are drawn upon in discussing later topics in this paper. I also should note that several recruitment methods (e.g., job advertisements, web sites) have yet to be addressed. For presentation purposes, I address additional recruitment methods later in this paper.

3.4. Future research on recruitment methods

In terms of future research, I believe researchers need to become more nuanced in their treatment of recruitment methods. For example, Rafaeli et al. (2005) demonstrated that not all newspaper advertisements are equivalent (i.e., the geographic focus of the newspaper can have important consequences). Similarly, Yakubovich and Lup (2006) showed that not all employee referrals are the same (i.e., the performance level of the referrer can be important). It is likely that future studies that involve a more fine-grained analysis of different recruitment methods are likely to add insight into method effects. For instance, the effects of college placement offices are not likely to be equivalent given some restrict the number of jobs for which a student can interview and others do not. In the former case, one might expect applicants to have better researched the hiring organization and to be more interested in a position with it. In a similar vein, in studying employee referral effects, there may be value in considering how well the individual making a referral knows the position being applied for (e.g., a member of the work group is likely to have more information to share than a person who works in another division of the company). It also may be important to consider the type of job (e.g., hourly vs. professional) under consideration. Conceivably, a current employee would be more concerned about his or her reputation in considering whether to refer someone depending upon the type of job he or she held.

Before moving to the topic of recruiter effects, I should reiterate a point raised by Rynes and Cable (2003). These authors criticized much of the recruitment literature for having been too narrowly focused. For example, some researchers have examined realistic job previews; others have studied recruitment methods. A problem with such compartmentalized research is that it fails to recognize important interactions that may help explain research results. For example, it is widely accepted that employee referrals have beneficial effects due to referrers providing job candidates with important information about positions being considered. If this is the case, in the context of RJP’s, one might hypothesize much weaker RJP effects for recruits generated by employee referrals than for recruits who responded to a job advertisement.

4. Research on recruiter effects

For more than three decades, the topic of recruiter effects (e.g., differences due to recruiter behavior, demographics, and function) has stimulated considerable research (Breaugh et al., 2008). A meta-analysis published by Chapman et al. (2005) nicely summarizes the studies that have been conducted with regard to recruiter behavior. They found that individuals who viewed a recruiter as having been personable, trustworthy, informative, and/or competent were more attracted to a position with the
A study of recruiter behavior by Rynes et al. (1991) provides considerable insight into why a recruiter’s actions can be important (e.g., how a recruiter treats an applicant may be viewed as a signal of how the person would be treated if hired). Particularly noteworthy is their finding that recruiters were “associated with changes in many job seekers’ assessment of fit over time — 16 of 41 individuals mentioned recruiters or other corporate representatives as reasons for deciding that an initially favored company was no longer a good fit, whereas an identical number mentioned recruiters as a reason for changing an initial impression of poor fit into a positive one” (p. 59).

In contrast to the sizable number of studies that have examined the effects of a recruiter’s behavior, relatively few studies have examined whether recruiter demographics were linked to job applicant reactions. For the most part, results of these studies have been inconsistent. Rynes and Cable (2003) summed up past research in this area as having found “weak, conflicting, or nonexistent effects of gender or race on overall applicant impressions” (p. 58).

The issues of recruiter experience, function, and training also have attracted some attention. With regard to experience, it was unrelated to applicant reactions in a study conducted by Connerley (1997). In contrast, Connerley and Rynes (1997) reported that applicants had more favorable impressions of more experienced recruiters than they did of less experienced recruiters. Although they could only located three relevant studies, Chapman et al. (2005) examined whether being a line versus a staff recruiter was associated with applicant attraction to a job with an organization. They reported that effect sizes varied from −.12 to .10 with a mean effect size of −.01. In sum, current research suggests that neither recruiter experience nor function makes much of a difference to job candidates. With regard to recruiter training, both Connerley (1997) and Stevens (1998) found it was not related to applicant ratings of their interactions with recruiters.

Based upon past research, one might conclude that with the exception of their behaviors (e.g., personableness) recruiter characteristics do not really matter. For several reasons, such a conclusion may be premature. One reason for this sentiment is that most studies of recruiter effects have involved college students searching for jobs through their college placement offices. Whether findings from this setting generalize to job candidates with more experience in the job search process, who are less educated, or who differ in other ways is an open question. Furthermore, most studies of recruiter effects have only investigated initial impression of recruits (typically, questionnaires are completed after a student leaves the placement office after an interview). In summary, given the limitations of many studies of recruiter variables, it is possible that future research that is more nuanced in looking at recruiter variables may find certain variables to be quite important. In this regard, it is useful to consider three reasons offered by Breaugh et al. (2008) for why recruiters might matter. In this paper, my co-authors and I suggested that different types of recruiters may be important because (a) they vary in the amount of job-related information they possess (and therefore can share), (b) they differ in terms of their credibility in the eyes of recruits, and (c) they signal different things to job candidates.

These three factors suggest that future research on recruiters needs to be more fine-grained (e.g., not just dichotomizing recruiters as being line or staff) than past research has been. For example, with regard to a recruiter information effect, it may make a difference whether the “recruiter” is a member of the work group a job candidate would be joining as opposed to someone outside of the work group (i.e., a member of the work group should have more detailed information to share). Similarly, with regard to recruiter credibility, research (e.g., Coleman & Irving, 1997) suggests job incumbents are viewed as more credible by applicants than staff recruiters from the HR department. Although in general such a credibility difference due to position is likely to be true, consider a situation in which a job incumbent’s department is understaffed and under pressure to fill job openings (or the organization paid a large bonus to an employee who referred an individual who is hired). In such a situation, a job incumbent may exaggerate the benefits of joining the organization and thus lose credibility. In contrast, consider if the HR department was committed to providing job candidates with realistic information concerning open positions in order to increase retention. In such a situation, a corporate recruiter might be viewed as highly credible.

5. Research on other recruitment topics

5.1. Targeting individuals for recruitment

The first two questions under strategy development in Fig. 1 are “Whom to Recruit?” and “Where to Recruit?” Both of these questions involve the targeting of certain types of individuals for recruitment. Ployhart, Schneider, and Schmitt (2006) addressed the issue of targeting as follows: “One topic that is important, but for which there is essentially no research, is the topic of targeted recruitment” (p. 291). Given that answering the questions of “Whom to Recruit?” and “Where to Recruit?” is so basic to the recruitment process, it difficult to understand why the topic of targeted recruitment has attracted so little attention from researchers.

One of the few studies to investigate the targeting of certain types of individuals was conducted by Rynes, Orlitzky, and Bretz (1997) who examined what factors might underlie whether an employer targeted new college graduates for recruitment or more experienced college graduates. These researchers found that organizations perceived more experienced graduates as having more realistic job expectations, a better work ethic, better technical skills, a greater chance of success, but as being less willing to learn. In the practitioner literature, some recent attention has been given to seniors as a group to target. For example, companies such as Wal-Mart have worked with the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) to make contact with seniors (Freudenheim, 2005). Among the reasons cited by companies for targeting seniors are: they have better skills, they have a better work ethic, and they are less likely to quit.

Once an organization has decided on the type of individuals to target for recruitment, the next question it needs to answer is — “Where to recruit?” The study by Rafaeli et al. (2005) that was discussed earlier is the only one I could find that addressed this
question. They reported that geographically focused newspaper advertisements were superior to non-geographically focused ads in terms of the number of applicants generated, the number of hires, and the cost per hire. In contrast to the academic literature, the practitioner literature provides a number of examples of geographical targeting. For example, a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* (Spors, 2007) described how RightNow Technologies Inc., a company located in Boseman, Montana (population ~30,000), had “tapped out the local supply of talent” (B4). Given its need for software engineers and marketing professionals, the company first utilized job advertisements placed in major cities located in the Western United States. When this strategy proved ineffective, RightNow Technologies concluded that it might more effectively recruit by attempting to attract former Montana residents to return home. In order to reach such individuals, the company purchased a list of alumni from the Montana State University. This targeting of individuals who had formerly lived in Montana proved so successful that six other firms have recently utilized lists of Montana State University alumni to fill job openings.

Despite the inattention given to targeted recruitment by researchers, given its potential to impact both pre-hire and post-hire recruitment outcomes, it merits attention in the future. For example, targeting certain types of individuals should affect such pre-hire outcomes as applicant education level, work experience, and demographic diversity. Given in an earlier paper, my co-authors and I (Breaugh et al., 2008) presented a detailed discussion of the merits of targeted recruitment, only a few key issues (i.e., position attractiveness, expectancy of receiving a job offer, and self-insight) are highlighted here.

One advantage of targeted recruitment is that it should bring job openings to the attention of individuals who are likely to be attracted to what a position offers (e.g., the U.S. Army targets economically disadvantaged high school graduates given they are likely to be attracted by the college tuition package it offers). By targeting individuals who value what a position with it offers, an employer should increase its probability of filling vacant positions. Targeting certain groups also should convey to members of the group that the employer is particularly interested in hiring them. This should increase their expectancy of receiving a job offer which should increase their likelihood of submitting applications and remaining interested in the position throughout the recruitment process. For example, an employer that works with AARP to hold a job fair for seniors is likely to convey that it is genuinely interested in hiring them. Knowing this, seniors may be more likely to submit applications and go through the selection process.

Another advantage of an employer making an informed decision regarding what types of individuals to target is this should result in applicants who have greater self-insight than might otherwise be the case. For example, as noted earlier, it is common for job applicants to lack insight into what a job involves and how they will react to it if they lack first-hand experience. The following quote from Louis (1980) conveys a sense of how a new employee’s lack of self-insight can result in a lack of person–job fit—“I chose this job because it offered a great deal of freedom, now I realize I don’t want so much freedom” (p. 238). Given this adverse reaction results from a new hire lacking a visceral understanding of how she or she would react to the actual experience of having a high degree of autonomy, it would have been difficult for organization to have avoided such a reaction even if it had provided a realistic job preview. However, a well-thought out targeting strategy (i.e., one in which an employer sought out persons with first-hand experience in positions similar to those it is trying to fill) might have avoided such a reaction.

In order to get such first-hand experience, consider if an organization targeted former employees for rehiring (only those who had performed well previously). Assuming things have not changed substantially, such rehires (especially if they returned to their former work group/department) should have an accurate understanding of such important position attributes as job duties, a supervisor’s style, work schedules, coworker relationships, and organizational values. Given rehired employees should have a rich appreciation of what a position involves based upon their first-hand experience, an employer does not have to be concerned about such things as whether a recruiter was viewed as credible. Former employees also should have an accurate understanding of how they will react to position attributes if rehired. Furthermore, rehires should have self-insight with regard to whether their values, interests, talents, etc. correspond to what a position offers and demands. Given these numerous benefits, it is not surprising that research (see Zottoli & Wanous, 2000) has shown rehires to be less likely to quit than individuals recruited via formal sources and that the practitioner literature (e.g., White, 2005) provides examples of companies (e.g., Johnson & Johnson) that are positively disposed towards rehiring former employees.

Although they are unlikely to have the position insight and self-insight of former employees, there are a number of other groups that might be beneficial for targeting (by targeting, I mean actively seeking out as opposed to giving preference to during the selection process). For example, in terms of improving person–job fit, recruiting individuals who have worked in the same job or in similar jobs with other organizations makes obvious sense (e.g., a person who has previously worked in a call center for another employer should have a better idea of what the job involves and his/her ability to do it effectively than someone lacking call center experience). In terms of position-organization fit, targeting individuals who have prior experience with a similar organization should be effective (e.g., a person who has previously worked for a not-for-profit institution should be more aware of the unique features of working for such an institution than individuals who have always worked in the private sector).

Although other issues relevant to targeting could be addressed (e.g., a study by Brooks, Cornelius, Greenfield, & Joseph, 1995; reported that students who had participated in internships had greater self-insight; a study by Ryan, Horvath, & Kriska, 2005; showed the value of hiring individuals who had family members who worked for the organization in term of person–organization fit), I trust the preceding treatment of targeted recruitment makes clear why Ployhart et al. (2006) felt this was such an important area for future research.

### 5.2. The content of job advertisements

Job advertisements have received considerable attention from recruitment researchers. Before summarizing this research, it should be noted that much of it (e.g., Thorsteinson & Highhouse, 2003) has involved college students who reacted to job
advertisements provided by an experimenter. It also should be noted that numerous types of advertisements exist and they can have different effects. For example, an individual who is not actively looking for a job may not see a newspaper ad, but may be “caught” by a radio or television ad. Given that most of the research conducted has involved print ads, I will not address the pros and cons of using other advertising media (see Breaugh, 1992).

In terms of the amount of information conveyed in a job advertisement, research has shown that ads with more information resulted in a job opening being viewed as more attractive (e.g., Allen, Mahto, & Otondo, 2007) and as more credible (e.g., Allen, Van Scotter, & Otondo, 2004) than ads that contained less information. Research (e.g., Roberson, Collins, & Oreg, 2005) also has shown that advertisements that contain more specific information about a position increased applicant interest in the position and may result in better person–organization fit.

Concerning a job advertisement or a recruitment brochure that conveys information with regard to the diversity of an organization’s work force, considerable research has been conducted. For example a study by Avery, Hernandez, and Hebl (2004) showed that including pictures of minorities increased how attracted Blacks and Latinos were to an organization while having no effect on the reactions of White participants in the study. A study by Avery (2003) found that such pictures had more impact on minorities if some of the minorities portrayed were in supervisory positions.

In terms of job advertisements that convey information concerning an employer’s affirmative action policy, a number of studies have been conducted. For example, McKay and Avery (2006) found that students who could be beneficiaries of affirmative action programs tended to react more favorably to them. Kim and Gelfand (2003) found that students with a higher level of ethnic identity reacted more positively to a diversity initiative contained in a recruitment advertisement. Not surprisingly, reactions to diversity initiatives have not been universally positive. In a study that involved students who were members of the National Society of Black Engineers, Slaughter, Bulger, and Bachiocchi (2005) found that the nature of the affirmative action plan influenced how the Black engineering students responded. For example, these authors reported that, compared to an affirmative action-oriented recruitment effort (i.e., recruiting in a way that made an extra effort to bring job openings to the attention of minorities), preferential treatment of minorities was perceived as less fair and more likely to result in the stigmatization of new hires. A recent study by Walker, Field, Giles, Bernerth, and Jones-Farmer (2006) addressed how non-minorities reacted to information about affirmative action initiatives by an employer. They found that several individual difference variables (e.g., equity sensitivity, self-efficacy, personal prejudice) at least partially explained non-beneficiaries’ negative reactions to affirmative action policy information being included in a job advertisement.

Before leaving the topic of the inclusion of information concerning an employer’s diversity or affirmative action efforts in a job advertisement, an essay by McKay and Avery (2005) should be mentioned. These authors discussed how many minorities discovered that information they received concerning their employer’s diversity initiatives did not match the organizational reality they experienced upon beginning work. McKay and Avery addressed several negative outcomes of such a disconnect including new employees perceiving a violation of their psychological contract and their subsequently leaving the organization.

With regard to the content of a job advertisement, its realism is an important component. Given the attention I have given to realistic job previews, I will not address realism in the context of job advertisements (see Reeve, Highhouse, & Brooks, 2006). However, an example of a recent ad for caseworkers is informative. This ad began: “Wanted: men and women willing to walk into strange buildings in dangerous neighborhoods, be screamed at by unhinged individuals — perhaps in a language you do not understand — and, on occasion, forcibly remove a child from the custody of a parent because the alternative could have tragic consequences” (Santora, 2008, B3). This advertisement and others like it resulted from the difficulty that the New York City Administration for Children’s Services was having with employee retention. In order to try to reduce employee turnover, it decided it was best to inform potential applicants of “just how difficult the job can be.” This advertisement and ones similar to it were placed in subway cars. The intent of this realistic advertising campaign according to the children’s services commissioner is to give “a very clear picture of what the job is.” This campaign (it also involves a video shown to applicants that highlights the most difficult parts of the job) is not being conducted in isolation. Steps also are being taken to improve the job of caseworker. Although it is hoped that providing potential employees with realistic information will improve caseworker retention, the Children’s Services Department is not naive. It recognizes that conveying information that results in recruits having a visceral understanding of what the job entails is a real challenge — “the reality is that it is profoundly difficult to know how a worker will react the first time he or she is asked to go into a strange home uninvited and break up a family” (B3).

In concluding this examination of research on job advertisements, the value of more research with real applicants applying for real jobs should be apparent. Particularly valuable would be field studies in which employers experimented with different types of advertisements. For example, in trying to fill a position, an employer could contrast the effects of a traditional ad against a blind ad (one in which the employer is not identified) in terms of such pre-hire outcomes as number of applications generated, quality of applicants, job filled, etc.

5.3. Internet recruiting via an employer’s web site

Given their popularity as a recruitment method (Cappelli, 2001), recently researchers (e.g., Allen et al., 2007) have given considerable attention to organizational web sites. For example, researchers have conducted surveys of HR practitioners. The results of such surveys typically have found that web sites are viewed as a very effective recruitment method (e.g., Chapman & Webster, 2003; Stone, Lukaszewski, & Isenhour, 2005). In particular, web sites are perceived as generating a large number of job applicants at relatively low cost. Not surprisingly, the relative effectiveness of an employer’s web site is highly dependent upon the employer’s visibility and reputation (Rynes & Cable, 2003; have provided an excellent discussion of variables that can affect each of
these variables). Although caveats have been raised about potential adverse impact and privacy issues (see Stone et al., 2005), it appears likely that the use of web sites as a recruitment mechanism will continue to increase (Steel, 2007).

Researchers have attempted to better understand applicant reactions to organizational web sites by conducting content analyses of them. With regard to the content analyses that have been conducted (e.g., Cober, Brown, & Levy, 2004), research has shown that aesthetics (e.g., including pictures, using distinctive fonts), content (e.g., important job attributes are addressed), and function (e.g., ease of navigation) all are rated as being important.

In addition to surveying HR practitioners and conducting in-depth analyses of existing corporate web sites, researchers (e.g., Allen et al., 2007) have examined web site effects by conducting experimental simulations. Studies have manipulated web site attributes such as its aesthetics, ease of navigation, and the content provided. Not surprisingly, all of these attributes have been found to be important (e.g., Braddy, Meade, & Kroustalis, 2006; Cober, Brown, Levy, Cober, & Keeping, 2003; Williamson, Lepak, & King, 2003).

As noted by Stone et al. (2005) and others (e.g., Dineen et al., 2007), a potential limitation of the use of a corporate web site as a recruitment mechanism is that a firm may be inundated with applications from individuals who are not good candidates for the positions advertised. As a way to address this issue, a number of researchers (Hu, Su, & Chen, 2007) have suggested that, given its interactive capability, a web site could provide feedback concerning person–job/organizational fit to potential applicants. In one of the first studies to investigate the value of a web site providing such fit information, Dineen, Ash, and Noe (2002) found that individuals who received feedback suggesting they were a good fit were more attracted to the organization. The results of a recent study by Dineen et al. (2007) are particularly interesting. These authors utilized a 2×2 design to manipulate whether a web site had good or poor aesthetic properties and whether or not the site provided customized information concerning how well a student fit the advertised position. Dineen and his colleagues found when a web site had both good aesthetics and provided customized information a student was likely to spend more time viewing the web site and was better able to recall information provided.

Although the interactive capability of using a web site to provide fit information to prospective job applicants is intriguing, two important issues merit consideration. First, the studies that have been conducted have involved students acting in the role of job applicants. Whether real job seekers would provide accurate information about themselves (e.g., their skills, values, interests) so that an employer could provide accurate fit information is unclear. A second factor to consider is that Williamson et al. (2003) found that the students in their study preferred web sites that focused exclusively on recruitment as opposed to those that had both a recruitment and selection orientation.

A key issue for an organization using a web site to recruit is whether site visitors view the information provided as credible. In this regard, one would expect that an organization that presented external verification of the information it presented (e.g., being named to Fortune magazine’s list of “Best Companies”) would enhance its credibility. In a recent study that investigated the value of providing employee testimonials on an employer’s web site in comparison to receiving employer-related information from a web site not affiliated with the employer, Van Hoye and Lievens (2007) found that information provided on the non-employer site had greater credibility.

In summary, although a number of studies on the use of an employer’s web site as a recruitment mechanism have been conducted recently, as noted by Ployhart (2006), “this research has scarcely scratched the surface” (p. 875). For example, we still know little about such things as what type of information is sought out first and what causes a site visitor to leave without submitting an application. Given the creative things that organizations are doing with their web sites (e.g., posting videos of actual work sites; Needelmen, 2007), more research is clearly needed.

### 5.4. Internet recruiting via job boards

An area of research that has received little attention from academic researchers is the use of internet job boards (e.g., CareerBuilder.com). This is surprising given the number of job candidates that are generated from such sources (Steel, 2007). One study that examined job boards was conducted by Jattuso and Sinar (2003) who investigated differences in the types of applicants generated by general job boards (e.g., Monster.com, HotJobs.com) and industry/position specific job boards. They reported that applicants generated by industry specific job boards had better educational qualifications, a higher level of skills, but less work experience than those generated via general job boards.

Given employers have complained that broad-based sites generate too many applications from unqualified applications, it appears that in the future the number of specialized job boards will continue to grow. One way that so-called niche sites may attempt to limit to individuals posting resumes is by charging for such postings. For example, Ladders.com charges applicants a monthly fee of $30.00 to post applications for executive positions that pay at least $100,000 per year. Similarly, ExecuNet.com charges applicants a monthly fee of $39.00 for access to its on-line listing of executive jobs (Tedeschi, 2007). Whether such a subscription fee results in organizations receiving fewer but higher quality applications is an open question.

Before leaving the topic of job boards, a very serious issue, breaches of security, needs to be addressed. In their chapter on internet recruiting, Stone et al. (2005) addressed this important but generally overlooked issue in considerable detail. They noted that U.S. laws generally do not prevent a job board from sharing applicant data with other sources without an applicant’s approval (the European Union does have laws protecting the privacy of such data). Stone and her colleagues discussed a specific example of a job board selling resumes and email addresses to other companies. More recently, Zeidner (2007) has addressed the issue of data security. She cited the case of the personal information of over one million subscribers to Monster.com having their personal information stolen. As discussed by Zeidner, unless data submitted by job applicants can be made more secure, the use of job boards may diminish.
5.5. Site visits

To date, relatively little research attention has been given to the job candidate site visit (McKay & Avery, 2006). This lack of attention is unfortunate given that compared to other recruitment activities (e.g., an interaction with a recruiter at a job fair), the site visit provides a “longer and more intense applicant–company interaction” (Taylor & Bergmann, 1987; p. 273) and therefore has the potential to have a great influence on an applicant. In terms of the site visit, I located six studies that shed light on its potential importance.

Rynes et al. (1991) conducted a study of college graduates who were on the job market. They found that after site visits approximately 30% of the individuals in their sample turned down job offers from employers to which they were initially attracted. Two of the factors that influenced individuals’ reactions to a site visit were being treated professionally and meeting high-status people. Turban, Campion, and Eyring (1995) reported that a site host’s likeability was a key factor in whether a job offer was accepted. The importance of host likeability in this study was likely due to the fact that the host would be a coworker of the applicant if he or she were hired. In their study, Boswell et al. (2003) focused on opportunities to meet people and site visit arrangements. They reported that meeting current employees in the job applied for, meeting high-level executives, and meeting individuals with similar backgrounds were important to job applicants. In terms of arrangements, such things as the visit being well-organized, being able to bring a significant other, and staying at an impressive hotel were mentioned as making a favorable impression.

Avery and McKay (2006) and McKay and Avery (2006) focused on the importance of the site visit for recruiting minorities. They discovered that three aspects of the site visit were important. First was simply the number of minorities at the site. Second was the level of jobs held by minorities. Third was the type of interactions observed between minority and majority group members. In contrast to these studies, in a study by Taylor and Bergmann (1987), the site visit had little impact on how applicants viewed employers. This lack of a site visit effect may at least partly due to the fact that several variables (including position attributes) were controlled in testing for the effect of a site visit.

Given its likely importance in many recruitment situations, the site visit clearly merits more research attention than it has received. Some of the reasons that a site visit is likely to be important are obvious (e.g., it gives a job candidate a chance to confirm initial impressions, seeing work being done may provide a more visceral understand of what a job entails than simply being told about it). However, other aspects of the site visit are less apparent. For example, it is likely that information gathered by a job candidate during a site visit may be used as a signal of unknown aspects of a job with the organization. For example, a poorly organized visit may be seen as an indicator of how other aspects of the business are run.

5.6. Timing issues

Results from a number of studies suggest that timing (i.e., timeliness and scheduling flexibility) is an important issue in the recruitment process. Research on timing has addressed when a recruitment effort began, whether information was provided to applicants in a timely manner, and flexibility in scheduling a site visit and with regard to the start date for employment.

With regard to when the recruitment process began, Turban and Cable (2003) found that employers who interviewed later in the year on a college campus had fewer job applicants and these candidates were of lower quality than employers who interviewed earlier. In a study by Rynes et al. (1991), approximately 50% of the students in their sample turned down a site visit invitation due to late timing. A report (Matthews, 2006) on the recruitment of law students by the United States Internal Revenue Service described the potential to have a great influence on an applicant. In terms of the timeliness of actions taken by an employer during the recruitment process, Rynes et al. (1991) found that delays in replying to job candidates resulted in some individuals eliminating the employer from consideration. Of particular note is that these authors perceived such applicant withdrawal occurred most frequently for the most sought after job candidates. Boswell et al. (2003) have similarly documented the importance of timely recruitment actions. Their results showed that receiving prompt responses from employers resulted in job candidates having a more positive view of the employer. Based upon their meta-analysis of existing research, Chapman et al. (2005) concluded that timely responses from employers were linked to greater applicant attraction to a job with the organization.

With regard to scheduling flexibility, both Rynes et al. (1991) and Boswell et al. (2003) reported that an employer’s willingness to be flexible in scheduling a site visit made a favorable impression on its recruits. With regard to a starting date for employment, Barber et al. (1999) documented that employers who were more flexible were more likely to have their offers accepted.

6. Suggestions for future research

Throughout this paper, I have offered suggestions for future research on a variety of recruitment topics. Although repeating these suggestions seems unnecessary, there may be value in reiterating a few key themes.

From reading this paper, it should be apparent that the samples used by many researchers have limited the conclusions that can be drawn from their studies. For example, in studies focusing on recruitment methods, the samples used frequently were new employees as opposed to job applicants or potential applicants (i.e., individuals who were informed of a job opening but chose not to apply). With regard to studies of recruiter effects, the samples used typically have been college students who were applying for
positions through a college placement office. Studies examining the effects of job advertisements also have relied heavily on college students. Most RJP studies have been conducted with unskilled individuals applying for lower-level (e.g., call center) positions. It suffices to say that more will be learned about the effects of recruitment activities if a wider range of samples were used.

In terms of topics meriting future research, the need for attention to be given to targeted recruitment was emphasized. Given that targeting certain types of individuals should result in applicants who: have more realistic job expectations, possess greater self-insight, are more skilled, are more diverse, are more likely to accept job offers, etc., such research is clearly needed. Also of great importance is future research that looks at the job applicant thought process. For example, several authors (Breaugh et al., 2008; Rynes & Cable, 2003) have suggested that job applicants view certain variables (e.g., how they were treated during a site visit) as “signals” of what things would be like if they joined an organization. Yet, we have at best a primitive understanding of this signaling process.

Mediating and moderating variables also merit more attention than they have received. Concerning the former, Rynes and Cable (2003) have noted that frequently mediating variables have been assumed rather than tested. For example, it is generally assumed that applicants generated via employee referrals have been informed about what a job is like. However, rarely has this assumption been tested and used as a mediator between recruitment method and pre-hire variables (e.g., job acceptance rate). It is also important for future research to be sensitive to moderating variables. For example, in the context of examining the effects of an RJP, it is important to consider whether applicants lacked realistic job expectations and/or had the ability to self-select out of job consideration if a position were seen as undesirable. It is likely that research will document much larger effect sizes for recruitment variables when certain moderating conditions are present.

A final theme that has permeated this paper is the need for future research on recruitment topics to be more nuanced (e.g., not treat all employee referrals as being equivalent). Such fine-grained research is likely to result in a better understanding of why recruitment variables have the effects they do (or don’t). Table 1 presents a sampling of several commonly examined recruitment methods that might benefit from more nuanced research.

7. Concluding remarks

Over the last four decades, the amount of recruitment research and the variety of topics addressed has increased substantially. Given the number of recruitment studies that have been published, I had to be selective in addressing topics in this paper. I chose to focus upon some topics that have attracted considerable attention from researchers (e.g., recruitment methods) and other topics (e.g., targeted recruitment) that I felt were under-researched considering their possible impact. My hope is that readers interested in specific issues I was unable to address will be able to generalize some of the main themes I emphasized (e.g., the importance of applicant self-insight, the importance of recruits having a visceral understanding of how they will react to a position) to these other topics (e.g., use of direct mail for reaching prospective job candidates). Readers interested in topics not addressed in this paper also may find useful information in chapters by Breaugh et al. (2008), Rynes and Cable (2003), and Saks (2005).

Given that this paper was to focus on employee recruitment, I did not discuss how the line between the topics of recruitment and selection is sometimes blurred (e.g., a work simulation may both help job applicants self-select out of job consideration while also helping an organization make selection decisions). However, for completeness, I should note that considerable research (see Ployhart, 2006) has shown that selection devices that are seen as lacking job relatedness can result in recruits being less attracted to an employer.

Throughout this paper, I have tried to stimulate future research on topics by noting limitations of past studies and by pointing out the importance of more fine-grained analyses of recruitment variables. Concerning my focus on prior studies, my intent was not to embarrass the authors of these papers. Rather, it was to show how methodological limitations restrict our ability to draw firm conclusions. With regard to the need for more nuanced research, conducting such research will not always be easy. However, I believe it will prove fruitful in terms of better understanding the recruitment process.