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A Study of Employee Referral Program: An examination of employees' motives

Etude du programme de recommandation des candidats : un examen des motivations des employés

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Abstract

In the current context, characterized by international competition, companies use different recruitment channels to find the ideal candidate. However, they are not able to find the suitable candidate, especially when faced with a rare profile on the job market. This situation encourages companies to optimize their recruitment strategies by using more powerful tools, hence the use of employee referrals. The objective of this study is to examine the relationship between the factors that motivate employees to participate in an employee referral program and the likelihood of success of this program.

This work was based on a quantitative approach. The analysis of the quantitative study was carried out using the Structural equation modeling under the PLS approach.

The results affirm the existence of a significant positive relationship between job satisfaction and the likelihood of participating in the referral program. There was also a significant negative relationship between perceived risk and the likelihood of participating in the referral program. However, we found no significant relationship between affective commitment/the referral bonus and the likelihood of participating in the referral program.

Keywords: Employee referrals; affective commitment; job satisfaction; perceived risk; referral bonus.

Résumé

Dans le contexte actuel, caractérisé par la concurrence internationale, les entreprises utilisent différents canaux de recrutement pour trouver le candidat idéal. Cependant, elles ne parviennent pas à trouver le candidat adéquat, surtout lorsqu'elles sont confrontées à un profil rare sur le marché du travail. Cette situation incite les entreprises à optimiser leurs stratégies de recrutement en utilisant des outils plus performants, d'où le recours au recrutement par recommandation. L'objectif de cette étude est d'examiner la relation entre les facteurs qui motivent les employés à participer à un programme de recommandation des employés et la probabilité de succès de ce programme.

Ce travail a été basé sur une approche quantitative. L'analyse de l'étude quantitative a été réalisée à l'aide de la modélisation par équations structurelles selon l'approche PLS.

Les résultats affirment l'existence d'une relation significative positive entre la satisfaction au travail et la probabilité de participer au programme de recommandation. Il existe également une relation significative négative entre le risque perçu et la probabilité de participer au programme de recommandation. Cependant, nous n'avons trouvé aucune relation significative entre l'engagement affectif/la prime de recommandation et la probabilité de participer au programme de recommandation.

Mots clés : programme de recommandation ; engagement affectif ; satisfaction au travail ; risque perçu ; prime de recommandation.

Introduction

In the current context, characterized by the international competition and the various fast technological changes, most of the Moroccan companies use various recruitment channels to find the ideal candidate such as the diffusion of advertisements via job boards, spontaneous applications, social networks, direct hunting. However, they are not able to find the one who really meets the requirements of the position, especially when facing a rare and specialized profile on the job market. This critical situation forces Moroccan companies to optimize their recruitment strategies by using new and more powerful tools in the field of recruitment and personnel selection, hence the use of employee referrals.

For a long time, informal, the practice of this recruitment method began 20 years ago in the United States, whereas in France, the phenomenon is more recent and already practiced by specialized recruitment agencies such as Coop-time, keycoopt, myjob company.

In Morocco, the employee referral has always existed, but in a more or less informal way due to the absence of a clear employee referral program that specifies the conditions of eligibility to refer candidates to the organization. The use of this new method of recruitment would be of major importance for companies since it allows them to mitigate the high costs of recruitment (service fees with recruitment firms, costs of posting job advertisements), as well as the costs generated by the training of new hires **(Hoffman, 2017; Pieper, Greenwald & Schlachter,2018; Stewart, et al.,1990)**.

The employee referral also addresses situations of uncertainty in the job market by reducing the level of information asymmetry so that employees can give candidates as much information about the work environment and organizational culture (**Pieper, Greenwald & Schlachter,2018).**Employee referral also improves the level of effectiveness, and efficiency of the recruiting process **(Dorkenoo, et al.,2016; Pieper, 2015)**, avoids the loss of financial resources for training new hires, and increases the likelihood of hiring loyal and successful candidates **(Burks, et al., 2015)**.

This article provides an opportunity to extend the research work and enrich the existing literature on the research topic by seeking to address the scientific gaps described by researchers in their suggestions to future researchers **(bloemer, 2010; Jayanthi, 2017; Hoffman, 2017; Pieper, 2015; Shinnar, Young & Meana, 2004; Van Hoye, 2013)**.

The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between the factors that drive employees to engage in an employee referral program and the likelihood of success of this

program while taking into account the expected risk. To do this, a quantitative survey of 55 hiring managers was conducted.

We will try through this work to study the following research question which will guide us throughout our work:

What is the relationship between employee motivational factors and the likelihood of success of the referral program?

This article is organized as follows, we first present our theoretical framework which has two main themes: 1) the motivational factors of employees in relation to the referral program, 2) the perception of risk in the employee referral program. In the second part, we briefly explain our research methodology and present our results, followed by a discussion in the third part. Finally, we conclude our work with limitations, practical implications and conclusion.

1. Theory and Hypotheses

Typologically, the term **"cooptation"** comes from the Latin verb "cooptatio, onis" which means "to elect" or "to incorporate". It is sometimes renamed "co-opting", "recommendation" or "participative recruitment". **Antoine Perruchot (2020)** - Co-founder of Keycoopt, in his white paper, defined cooptation/recommendation as a practice that relies primarily on the maintenance and activation of a network (personal or professional) to obtain recommendations in the context of recruitment/talent search. This practice brings together a candidate, a recruiter and a recommender, who may also be an employee of the company (p.1).

Jayanthi (2017) defined employee referral program as an internal recruitment method used by organizations to find potential candidates using their existing employees. A referral program encourages existing employees of the company to select and recruit suitable candidates from their social networks **(Benchemam & Galindo,2016).** The employee referral program is primarily used by organizations to hire top talent while reducing the time and cost of recruiting (p.132).

1.1. Employee motivation factors

1.1.1. The referral bonus

Companies provide their employees with incentives to motivate them to recommend candidates for vacancies within the company. The impact of financial incentives on the degree to which employees are motivated to engage in the employee referral program has been widely examined by researchers (**Shinnar, Young & Meana, 2004; Van Hoye, 2013).**

Shinnar, Young & Meana (2004) developed a model titled Employee Recommenders' Motivation and Outcomes (ERMO) which consists of examining the motivating factors as well

as the consequences of referral for the organization. They argue that financial incentives motivate employees to recommend candidates to the organization.

In a similar vein, **Van Hoye (2013)** conducted a study in Belgium on two organizations to examine the determinants of the consequences of the candidate referral program. His research objective is to investigate the intrinsic, extrinsic, and prosocial motivators that encourage or discourage referral intention. Based on a sample of 232 employees working in organizations, the author found that the referral bonus has a major effect on employees' referral intentions. Furthermore, organizations that give referral bonuses to their employees receive more positive than negative referrals compared to organizations that do not give referral bonuses to their employees. There are two theories that are used to determine the level of employee involvement in a referral program in the presence of financial incentives.

Molm, Collett & Schaefer (2007) have identified three forms of social exchange theory to determine the nature of the exchange relationship existing between two parties.

Generally, there is direct negotiated exchange (the exchange between the two parties results in a known reciprocity), direct reciprocal exchange (the two parties engage in the exchange without expecting reciprocity from their exchange), and general exchange (the reciprocity of the exchange is not received by the second party, but by a third party in the exchange). In this case, the first form of exchange seems to be more in line with the level of involvement of the employees in the exchange (the exchange between the organization and the recommender takes the form of a referral bonus attributed to the recommender).

Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory is applied in the context of employee referral. Vroom argues that the level of motivation of individuals is dependent on three variables: valence, instrumentality and expectation. In the context of employee referrals, expectation corresponds to the confidence that the recommender has in his or her ability to recommend suitable candidates for his or her organization, while instrumentality is related to the level of reward obtained through the effort. Finally, valence corresponds to the value attributed to the reward by the individual. The three motivational variables would determine the level of involvement of employees in the candidate referral program.

Hypothesis 1: The presence of a referral bonus positively promotes the probability of making referrals.

1.1.2. Job Satisfaction

Existing literature on the topic of the candidate referral program has examined factors that can influence the likelihood of referral program success. Job satisfaction and affective commitment

affect the level of employee involvement in the referral program **(Pieper, Greenwald & Schlachter,2018)**.

Van Hoye (2013) examined three motivational factors (intrinsic, extrinsic, prosocial) and their impact on the degree to which employees are motivated to recommend candidates for their companies. The author asserts based on an empirical study of two organizations, the positive impact of job satisfaction on employees' motivation to engage in the candidate referral process and consequently, the success of the program.

Hypothesis 2: Job satisfaction positively promotes the likelihood of making referrals.

1.1.3. Affective commitment

Another motivational factor discussed in the literature that drives employee motivation to engage in the referral program is affective commitment. This is defined as the level of attachment of the individual to the organization **(Mercurio, 2015)**. It corresponds to the strength of identification and involvement of the individual in an organization **(porter, et al.,1974, p.604)**. These authors identified three factors of organizational commitment which are, belief in the goals and values of the organization, willingness and desire to exert effort for the organization, maintaining a relationship focused on organizational membership. In the context of a relationship with the organization, employees with high level of affective commitment report that their social exchange with the organization would be reciprocal in either a formal or informal way **(Wayne, Shore & Liden,1997)**. We therefore assume that employees with a high level of affective commitment will be able to engage more in the exchange relationship with their organizations by recommending profiles that might be a good fit for the job vacancy.

Employees with a high level of affective commitment value the resources of their companies, so they will offer services to indebt their companies for future exchanges. Therefore, they will be more motivated to recommend.

Hypothesis 3: Affective commitment positively promotes the likelihood of making recommendations.

1.1.4. Affective commitment and the referral bonus

Now we try to find out if the referral bonus could offset a low level of affective commitment. Employees with a low level of affective commitment will not be willing to engage further in a relationship with their companies since they are not attached to their companies and do not value the companies' resources and therefore, they will need to be motivated by financial incentives to be able to recommend candidates **(Pieper, Greenwald & Schlachter,2018)**.

In this research work, we assume that the referral bonus can compensate for a low level of affective commitment since it has a monetary character that drives motivation among employees.

Chen (2011) conducted a study in China on 170 employees to investigate the existing relationship between knowledge sharing and relational conflict with the presence of a moderating variable, which is, reward. The author asserts the negative relationship between knowledge sharing and interpersonal conflict by taking into account the prominent role of the variable "reward" as a moderator of this relationship. He found that Chinese employees share their knowledge in interpersonal conflict situations when there is a reward while this relationship tends to be negative when the company does not provide any reward. On the other hand, employees with a high level of affective commitment will not be motivated by a reward from the organization since they are committed to the values and principles of their companies. These employees give more attention to future opportunities for social exchange with their organizations than an immediate reward **(Pieper, Greenwald & Schlachter,2018)**.

Hypothesis 4: The referral bonus moderates the relationship between the level of affective commitment and the likelihood of making referrals.

1.2. Risk perception in the referral program

The notion of risk perception has been briefly examined in the literature by some researchers, and therefore, future research should be conducted to fully understand the effect of risk perception on the level of employee commitment and involvement in the referral Program **(Pieper, Greenwald & Schlachter,2018)**. In this context, the concept of risk can take different forms: risk of the degradation of the relationship between the recommender and the referred employee, risk of the reputation of the recommender, the non-acceptance of the referred employee by the employees of the company. The risk in the referral program can be due to the inability of the new hire to easily adapt to the culture of the company or his ability to successfully accomplish the tasks that will be assigned to him. This situation will lead the company to doubt the ability of its employees to recommend qualified candidates for the vacant position since the role of the recommender will be valued and appreciated based on the performance of the recommended candidate **(Connelly, et al., 2011)**. The recommender should ensure that the referred employee is well integrated into the company to avoid any possible risks related to the new hire's integration into the company **(Fernandez, Castilla & Moore, 2000)**.

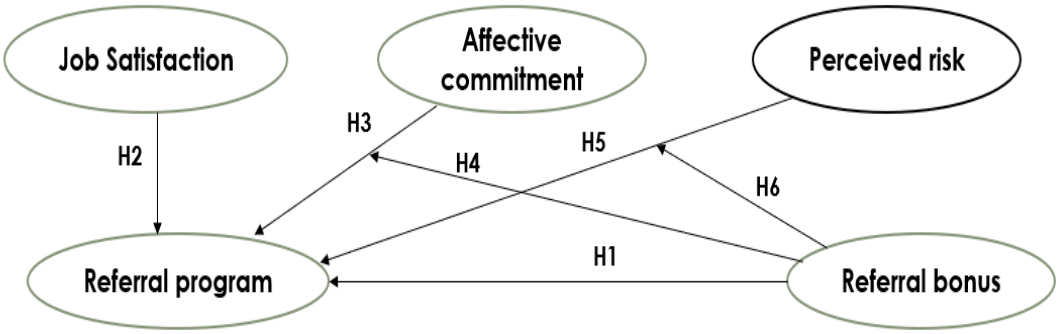
Hypothesis 5: Risk perception negatively influences the likelihood of making referrals.

Pieper, Greenwald & Schlachter (2018) examined the influence of factors that motivate employees to engage in a referral program and the likelihood of success of that program with the presence of risk. Based on a sample of 186 U.S. employees, they argue that risk heavily influences employees' referral intentions and financial incentives contribute to the mitigation of a high level of risk.

In addition, **Marin (2011)** reported in a series of interviews with 37 insurance agents in a call center in Canada that the referral bonus had little influence on reducing high risk. Agents are not willing to engage in a referral program even if they are offered $500 for each employee who stays with the company for six months.

Hypothesis 6: The referral bonus moderates the relationship between perceived risk and the likelihood of making referrals.

Figure N°1: Relationships tested



Source: personal elaboration

2. Methodology

2.1. Subjects and procedure

The population of our study includes hiring managers from different recruitment agencies in Morocco.

To conduct this study, we adopted a questionnaire consisting of 29 questions. This questionnaire was administered to 60 hiring managers who participated in this study. Among them, 5 people were excluded from the analysis because they did not answer all the questions. In total, the sample for this study consists of 55 individuals (32 women and 23 men). The sampling method used is non-probability sampling with the snowball method, which consists of asking a respondent to identify other individuals with similar characteristics.

We constructed the questionnaire using an ordinal Likert scale. For this study, we opted for the 4-point Likert scale (very satisfied, satisfied, not satisfied, not at all satisfied). Most of the measurement scales already exist in the literature, which gives the advantage of being validated. We have a total of four independent variables "job satisfaction; affective commitment; referral bonus; perceived risk" and only one dependent variable "the referral program".

For the "job satisfaction" variable, we used the Roussel scale (1994) to define four items. Two of these items were: "Are you satisfied with the working conditions?"; "Are you satisfied with your importance in the eyes of others?". For the "affective commitment" variable, we drew on statements used by **Durrieu &Roussel (2002)** and **Meyer, Allen & Smith (1993)**. One of these items was: "I would spend the rest of my working life in this company". To develop statements related to the "referral bonus" variable, we used R. pieper's scale, M. greenwald, D. Schlachter (2018). One of the items was "The referral bonus is necessary to generate employee motivation". For the "risk" variable, we referred to **Bill Boorman (2013)**. One of the items was: "Recommending a candidate within my company is a big responsibility"; "recommending a candidate could impact my reputation within my company".

3. Results

Table 1: Reliability and construct validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
affective commitment	0,844	1,643	0,874	0,638
referral bonus	0,858	0,932	0,893	0,680
job satisfaction	0,802	0,808	0,870	0,627
risk perception	0,836	0,874	0,888	0,667
referral program	0,848	0,865	0,896	0,684

Source: SmartPLS 2021

The chronbach's alpha coefficients measuring the internal consistency of the items were acceptable for most of the independent variables (0.858 for referral bonus; 0.836 for risk perception; 0.802 for job satisfaction; 0.844 for affective commitment).

Plus, the composite reliability of all the variables is greater than 0.7 and the average variance extracted is greater than 0.5, which ensures the reliability of the data.

Table 2: Global quality of the model

	R^2	Adjusted R-squared	Q^2	GOF
Referral program	0,405	0,357	0,225	0,517

Source: SmartPLS 2021

According to the results of the above table, we find that the redundancy index(Q2) is positive which shows a good predictive quality of model.

The coefficient of determination (R2) reveals the overall quality of the model. Thus, it measures the ability of the independent variables to explain the dependent variable. In this case, the R^2 (0.405) is between 0.33 and 0.67 and therefore the acceptance of the model is moderate. For the Adjusted R Square, it has a value of 0.357, which is a bit close to R square.

The GOF has a value of 0.517. it is thus higher than 0.36. This reflects a significant fit of the model according to the grid of Wetzels, Odekerken-Schröder and Van Oppen (2009).

Table 3: Determination of the size effect (F^2)

Effect size (F^2)	Referral program	Comment
Risk Perception	**0,454**	F^2>0,35: the effect size is significant
Affective Commitment	0,002	F^2><0,02: the effect size is absent
Job Satisfaction	**0,086**	0,02< F^2><0,15: the effect size is weak
Referral Bonus	0,004	F^2><0,02: the effect size is absent

Source: SmartPLS 2021

From the results obtained on Table 3, we find that risk strongly explains the probability of making referrals (0.454) while the probability of making referrals is weakly explained by job satisfaction (0.086). Finally, affective commitment (0.002) and the referral bonus (0.004) have no contribution on the level of employee involvement in the referral program.

We will now proceed to the calculation of the error in order to verify whether the research model is stable or not. Using the "smart PLS" software, we will measure the significance of the causal relationships via Student's t-values.

Table 4: Testing of hypotheses

	Initial sample (O)	Mean (M)	Standard deviation	T Value	Validation Hypothesis
Affective commitment -> Referral program	-0.035	-0.034	0.161	0.217	Rejected
Risk -> Referral program	0.559	0.535	0.096	6,132	**Confirmed**
Referral bonus -> Referral program	-0.051	-0.026	0.141	0.364	Rejected
Job satisfaction -> Referral program	-0.234	-0.250	0.089	2.642	**Confirmed**

Source: SmartPLS 2021

Furthermore, we aim to examine the moderating effect of the "referral bonus" variable on the relationship between risk perception (affective commitment) and the probability of making referrals.

Table 5: Testing of moderator effects hypotheses

	Initial Sample (O)	Sample Average	standard deviation	T Value	P-value
Moderator affect 1	-0.011	0.002	0.125	0.090	**0.928**
Moderator affect 2	0.058	0.084	0.213	0.273	**0.785**

Source: SmartPLS 2021

Based on the results in the table, we found a p-value higher than 0.05 and therefore, we rejected the hypothesis which states that the referral bonus has a moderating effect on the relationship between risk perception and the likelihood to make referrals.

Similarly, for moderator effect 2, the p-value exceeds the 0.05 and thus, the hypothesis which states that the referral bonus has a moderating effect on the relationship between affective commitment and the probability of making referrals is rejected.

4. Overview and discussion of the results

Table 6: Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Research Hypothesis		Validation
H1	The presence of a referral bonus positively promotes the probability of making referrals.	Rejected
H2	Job satisfaction positively promotes the likelihood of making referrals.	**Accepted**
H3	Affective commitment positively promotes the likelihood of making recommendations.	Rejected
H4	The referral bonus moderates the relationship between the level of affective commitment and the likelihood of making referrals.	Rejected
H5	The risk perception negatively influences the likelihood of making referrals.	**Accepted**
H6	The referral bonus moderates the relationship between perceived risk and the likelihood of making referrals.	Rejected

Source: personal elaboration

The purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between factors that motivate employees to refer candidates and the likelihood of making referrals.

The results of our study revealed the absence of a relationship between referral bonus and the likelihood of making referrals. This shows the weak effect of financial incentives on employees' motivation to recommend candidates for a vacant position. These results are different from some research studies that highlighted the role of financial incentives in motivating employees to participate in the referral program **(Pieper, Greenwald & Schlachter,2018; Van Hoye, 2013)**.

Employees will be motivated to make referrals when their employers provide referral bonuses, while a larger bonus amount doubles the motivation of employees.

However, job satisfaction positively promotes the likelihood of making referrals. The higher the level of satisfaction employees have, the more likely they are to engage with their employers by recommending candidates for job openings. These results are broadly consistent with those collected by **Van hoye (2013)**. This author also focused on the positive influence that job satisfaction and the desire to help the organization have on employee commitment and involvement in the referral program.

The results of this research show the absence of a significant relationship between affective commitment and the likelihood of making recommendations. These results are completely different in comparison to a study that was conducted by **Pieper, Greenwald & Schlachter (2018)**. These authors found a positive relationship between affective commitment and the likelihood of making recommendations. Employees with high levels of attachment to their employers are the most motivated to engage more in the referral program since in the social exchange with organizations, employees seek to offer services to their employers in order to indebt them for future exchanges.

As predicted, employees do not have referral intentions as long as referral risk is present, hence the presence of a negative correlation between risk perception and the likelihood of making referrals. These results are confirmed by **Pieper, Greenwald & Schlachter (2018)** and **marin (2011)** who asserted the prominent role of risk perception in changing employee motivation levels.

Marin (2011) found through in-depth interviews that employees only share information about job opportunities 27% of the time. This is explained by the fact that information holders only share information about job opportunities with people close to them since they know their career goals while employees may also share this information with people who are not close

when they are highly qualified for an open position. Our results are similar to another American study that was conducted by **Smith's (2005)** based on a sample of 103 low-income African Americans. According to him, 81% of the African Americans report a low motivation to recommend candidates to their companies in order to avoid risking their reputation in the company especially when the performance of the recommended employee is not satisfactory. The majority of the respondents (75%) take the history of the candidate as the main criterion in order to make the decision to participate in the referral program.

As for the analysis of the moderating effect of the "referral bonus" variable, the results of the research show the absence of the moderating effect of the "referral bonus" variable on the relationship between affective commitment (risk) and the probability of making referrals. This seems logical given that the referral bonus has no influence on the probability of making referrals.

5. Research limitations

This study has two research limitations that need to be mentioned.

First, the sample size of this study is small (55 participants), which may call into question the generalizability of these results to other contexts. Additionally, our research was based on a non-probability "snowball" sampling method. This sampling method makes the generalization of the results difficult since it is based on a rational choice of the elements of the sample.

6. Practical implications

In view of the results obtained in this research work, the implementation of a formal referral program is a necessity for companies by setting the eligibility conditions for participation in the program and the reward modality. On the other hand, organizations should assure employees that they will not be responsible for the negative consequences of the referral program if the referred employee performs poorly during the probation period or fails to adapt to the organizational culture. This is essential given that the results of our study affirmed the negative impact of risk in changing employees' motivation to engage in the referral program.

Accordingly, companies could either encourage anonymous referrals or communicate a detailed job description to the recommender in order to avoid any risk of a bad hire **(Schlachter &Pieper,2019)**.

Finally, companies should reward and recognize employees' efforts instead of offering financial incentives since employees currently tend to engage in a referral program with their employers when they are satisfied in their jobs. This was affirmed by **Vijaya, M. (2012**) who emphasized the role of job satisfaction in contributing to a successful employee referral program.

Conclusion

Employee referral program has positive benefits for both the recommender and the company, since it helps to strengthen the sense of belonging among employees and they become ambassadors for the company, its culture and its values. This research led us to conclude that employees generally have a high perception of risk regarding participation in the referral program and refuse to engage in this program as long as the risk is high.

In conclusion, financial incentives are not effective in motivating employees to refer or in offsetting the risk associated with referral as employees seek other more motivating factors such as praise, recognition and satisfaction.

Regarding the main contributions of this research work, the study extends the limited research on the understanding of employee motivational factors and their impact on the likelihood of making referrals. Plus, no previous study to the best of the author's knowledge and through search in peer-reviewed databases has empirically examined the effects of employee motivational factors on the likelihood of making referrals in the Moroccan context.

Future investigations are necessary to validate the kinds of conclusions that can be drawn from this study since our study was not based on a large sample size and therefore, future researchers should conduct studies with a large sample size in order to generalize the results to other contexts. Additionally, it will be important that future research investigate employees' motives to engage in an employee referral program using probability sampling methods, as they are more valid and produce results that are representative of the entire population compared to non-probability sampling methods.

Future research should further develop and confirm these initial findings by conducting more relevant studies in other African countries since the majority of studies have been carried out in European and north American countries. In addition, the use of gender as a control variable might prove an important area for future research. The objective is to test the possible effect of gender on changes in employees' motivations to recommend candidates.

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