

Applying for Academic Positions: Concerns in Presenting Graphic Credentials on the World Wide Web

Arthur G. Bedecian
Louisiana State University

Hubert S. Feild
Auburn University

Finding the "perfect job" is an aspiration that most academics likely share. The SIOP Job Placement Service exists, in part, to assist in fulfilling this goal as both job applicants and employers strive to satisfy one another's expectations. Nonetheless, as Brems, Lampman, and Johnson (1995) have recently noted, a seeming unawareness persists among graduates from doctoral programs in psychology about how to complete a basic academic job application. Their analysis of 148 job applications for an entry-level position in experimental psychology indicated that a "significant proportion" were incomplete, inadequate in addressing the particulars of the job in question, and nonindividualized rather than tailored in approach. In an effort to offset these shortcomings, Brems et al. (1995) offered job applicants and their mentors a list of guidelines for preparing applications for university positions. Among the guidelines are suggestions such as "Do not include personal information (e.g., marital status, spouse's occupation, number of children, personal photographs) in a cover letter or vita unless it is absolutely salient to why you are applying for a given position" (p. 536).

In response to these guidelines, Fals-Stewart (1996), a recent (and successful) entrant into the academic job market, concurred with Brems et al. (1995) in believing that psychology graduate programs should place greater emphasis on training students to prepare viable job applications. Focusing, however, on the "other side of the coin," she interviewed 15 other psychology-program graduates, to offer a list of five recommendations for search committees in attracting and selecting the best possible candidates for a department's particular needs. The recommendations touch on both pleasant and unpleasant aspects common to the job searches of those Fals-Stewart interviewed.

The purpose of this note is to propose a codicil of sorts to both Brems et al. (1995) and Fals-Stewart (1996). Neither address an increasingly common practice, for example academic job applicants' use of home pages on the World Wide Web. Whereas concerns related to the electronic posting of academic job openings would seem to parallel recommendations given by Fals-Stewart for standard job announcements, such postings, in turn, have prompted an increase in electronic communications between job applicants

and search committee members. We suggest in this note that academic applicants contemplating use of a Web home page to communicate with search committees should carefully consider the themes and images their home pages project.

Although we are unable to provide generalizable data such as those offered by Brems et al. (1995), like these authors, we, too, have also recently engaged in job searches to fill academic positions. Consistent with their conclusion that applicants would benefit from better advice about how to complete an academic job application, we believe they would also profit from a suggested caution regarding the use of the Internet in securing an academic appointment.

Our principal concern is job applicants' use of personal home pages on the Web to supplement their paper credentials. Whereas Web pages (in particular, their graphic capabilities) offer a richer form of communication than paper credentials, such as curriculum vitae, traditional application forms, transcripts, references, and cover letters, they are not exempt from some of the same impressionistic nuances. Just as with paper credentials, electronically transmitted credentials using the Web are capable of communicating vivid images. And, as is the case with paper credentials, electronic credentials can be the starting point for developing all sorts of attributions and, in so doing, pose both a threat and an opportunity.

As Dipboye (1992) observed, the threat derives from the effects that cognitive categories and schema activated in initial encounters can have on the processing of information. Whereas search committee members can form impressions based on either paper or electronic credentials, the inclusion of graphics on an applicant's home page introduces an entirely new set of concerns. For instance, one electronically supplemented application that comes to mind not only included a traditional curriculum vitae but a series of photographs. Brems et al. (1995) specifically advised against including either personal photographs in a job application (unless they are absolutely salient to a position) or references to activities such as personal hobbies. The photo series, while perhaps meant to be an attempt to personalize the application, included a snapshot of the applicant and spouse, separate poses of the applicant's dogs, and a panoramic view of the applicant's favorite mountaintop campsite. Beyond communicating non-job related details of an applicant's life (and life style), such photos potentially introduce a host of attributions related to viewers' pre-interview evaluations of an applicant's suitability. Admittedly, whereas it may be illegal to request that a job applicant provide a photo, there is no prohibition against an applicant doing so. At the same time, superficial factors such as physical appearance have been shown to be an important influence on a wide variety of judgments (Dipboye, 1992). As related to job interviews, an applicant's appearance typically becomes apparent in the first few minutes of an in-person interview. Acknowledging variations in the

weight interviewers consciously and unconsciously place on applicant attributes, the introduction of different physical features (e.g., attractiveness) and personal information (e.g., marital status, family, hobbies) in pictures on a Web home page seen by potential employers prior to an actual interview can be risky. Will such pictures lead to positive, accurate impressions of candidate attributes by prospective employers? This risk is particularly apparent given what is known about the role of first impressions in the pre-interview phase of a job search. That such impressions as they relate to factors, such as attractiveness, may be moderated by gender, age, position requirements, and the personal characteristics of interviewers does little but underscore the possible dubiousness of using personal pictures on the Internet.

Whereas other aspects relating to supplementing one's vita with graphics on a personal home page could be mentioned (e.g., the impression created by dress as revealed in pictures), it perhaps will suffice to say that academic job applicants should be equally aware that first encounters with prospective employers, whether in person, on paper, or on the Web, can influence interviewers' evaluations of one's credentials. Thus, applicants considering using visual images on a Web home page should carefully consider their potential impact on viewers and script their page in a purposeful fashion.

References

- Brems, C., Lampman, C., & Johnson, M. E. (1995). Preparation of applications for academic positions in psychology. *American Psychologist, 50*, 533-537.
- Dipboye, R. L. (1992). *Selection interviews: Process perspectives*. Cincinnati, OH: South-Western.
- Fals-Stewart, W. (1996). Applications for academic positions in psychology: Recommendations for search committees. *American Psychologist, 51*, 737-738.