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Differentiation is key: should employers offer something unique or the same yet better?

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\begin{abstract}
Researchers agree that employers should differentiate themselves from their competitors to become the employer of choice. However, from the recruitment literature, it is not clear how employers should differentiate their employment offers. Building upon the structural alignment theory, we investigated in two experimental studies whether offering something unique (i.e., non-alignable attributes; e.g., offer a benefit package when competitors do not) or offering the same yet better (i.e., alignable attributes; e.g., offer a bigger benefit package than competitors) is the most effective differentiation strategy for employment offers and whether this depends on job seekers’ work experience. Offering the same yet better affected job seekers’ preferences more positively than offering something unique in lowly complex judgement and decision-making situations (Study 1) as well as in highly complex judgement and decision-making situations if job seekers had more work experience (Study 2). Hence, our findings suggest that differentiation strategies matter: employers should differentiate by offering the same yet better, particularly when they look for highly experienced job seekers in highly complex judgement and decision-making situations.
\end{abstract}

Forty per cent of European employers reports difficulties to fill vacancies, an increase of no less than 15% compared to 5 years earlier (ManpowerGroup, 2013, 2018). These numbers indicate that attracting human capital has become increasingly hard. Yet, human capital resources are pivotal for organizations to be successful (Wright & Ulrich, 2017) and to achieve a competitive advantage (Brymer et al., 2014; Ployhart & Kim, 2014). With that said and given the intensified war for talent, knowing how to become the employer of choice is more important than ever.

Conventional wisdom is that employers should differentiate themselves from their competitors to become the employer of choice (Collins & Kanar, 2014). However, recruitment literature on job choice mainly investigates the kind of attributes that affect job seekers’ preferences (e.g., Behling et al., 1968; Harold et al., 2014) and does not consider differentiation strategies. In addition, literature on employer branding is not clear about how employers should differentiate their employment offers. On the one hand, literature on employer branding conceptualizes differentiation as offering something unique (e.g., offer a benefit package when competitors do not; Cable, 2007), but, on the other hand, it empirically operationalizes differentiation as offering the same yet better (e.g., offer a bigger benefit package than competitors; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). As prior research has not made a distinction between these two differentiation strategies for employment offers, the effectiveness of these two differentiation strategies vis-à-vis each other has – to the best of our knowledge – not been examined in recruitment research, and is considered here.

To improve our understanding concerning how employers should differentiate on attributes identified as important in literature on job choice and what differentiation strategy from literature on employer branding is more effective, a marketing-based approach may be fruitful (Cable & Turban, 2001; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Indeed, the structural alignment theory (Markman & Gentner, 1993) evaluates the two differentiation strategies from literature on employer branding against one another. More specifically, this theoretical framework posits that the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better (i.e., alignable attributes) would have stronger positive effects than the differentiation strategy of offering something unique (i.e., non-alignable attributes) because alignable attributes get more attention and are easier to compare (e.g., Markman & Gentner, 1993; Zhang & Fitzsimons, 1999). The first goal of this paper, therefore, was to investigate whether the differentiation strategy of offering something unique (non-alignable attributes) or the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better (alignable attributes) more positively affects job seekers’ preferences.

Ployhart et al. (2017) recently argued that recruitment research should also concentrate on which recruitment strategies work best for what type of job seekers. Further, Lievens and Slaughter (2016) and Theurer et al. (2018) pointed out that the effectiveness of employer branding strategies may depend on the type of job seekers employers want to attract. A job seeker characteristic that may be particularly relevant to consider in this regard is job seekers’ work experience. Alignable and non-alignable attributes may have differential effects depending on job seekers’ work experience because job seekers with different levels of work experience may experience different levels of uncertainty, which may affect the influence of
alignable and non-alignable attributes (Sun et al., 2012). The second goal was hence to examine whether job seekers’ work experience as an individual difference variable affects what differentiation strategy has the most positive effect on job seekers’ preferences.

To investigate these goals, we conducted two experimental studies. In doing so, we contribute to the recruitment literature in two ways. First, addressing prior calls to draw from marketing research to advance our understanding of recruitment issues (Cable & Turban, 2001; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Walker & Hinojosa, 2014), we extend recruitment literature on job choice and employer branding by evaluating what the most effective differentiation strategy for employment offers is through the lens of the structural alignment theory from the marketing literature. This is at the same time a contribution to the literature regarding the structural alignment theory as its validity is investigated in another context than its initial domain of application (i.e., products and services), namely that of employment offers. Secondly, we test whether individual difference variables (i.e., whether a job seeker has a lot or little work experience) determine the effectiveness of differentiation strategies for employment offers.

**Differentiation strategies**

Job seekers screen numerous employment offers from various employers when searching for a job. During this screening process job seekers compare different employment offers (Mussweiler & Epstude, 2009; Posten & Mussweiler, 2017), develop a preference for certain employment offers (Soelberg, 1967), and decide to apply for only a limited number of the employment offers they screened (Barber, 1998). Employers hence need to ensure that job seekers prefer them over other employers, especially when labour markets are tight. In other words, employers should assure that they are the employer of choice. In this regard, the three implicit content theories from Behling et al. (1968) and evidence for these theories (e.g., Harold et al., 2014; Uggerslev et al., 2012) suggest that employers should focus on objective (e.g., location), subjective (e.g., image), and critical contact attributes (e.g., recruiter behaviours) in their recruitment strategies.

To become the employer of choice, researchers further agree that employers should differentiate themselves from their competitors (Collins & Kanar, 2014). Intriguingly, however, literature on job choice has devoted little attention to how employers should differentiate from their competitors on objective, subjective, and critical contact attributes. In contrast with the literature on job choice, literature on employer branding suggests two possible differentiation strategies that are relevant for the job choice domain. On the one hand, this literature posits that employers should differentiate their employment offer by offering something unique. As Cable (2007) stated “You can’t be great if you just do what everyone else does, you have to do something unique and out of the ordinary. If you want to stand out above your competitors, you can’t just be normal” (p. xix). Employers could, for instance, offer a benefit package when their competitors do not. Two theoretical arguments underlie this recommendation. First, unique attributes create unique brand associations and thus brand equity (Kapferer, 1995; Porter, 1985), which is defined as “the marketing effects uniquely attributable to the brand – for example, when certain outcomes result from the marketing of a product or service because of its brand name that would not occur if the same product or service did not have that name” (Cable & Turban, 2003, p. 2245). Secondly, brand equity engenders positive outcomes (Keller, 2000). Kim et al. (2012) found a positive relation between employer brand equity and intentions to pursue an employment opportunity.

On the other hand, literature on employer branding empirically investigates the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better. In the study of Lievens and Highhouse (2003), for instance, participants rated financial institutions on a number of attributes and the authors examined how the financial institutions differentiated themselves from each other on these same attributes. Employers offering a bigger or better benefit package than their competitors is an example of the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better. As these two possible differentiation strategies for employment offers (i.e., offering something unique and offering the same yet better) have not been distinguished in prior research, the effectiveness of these differentiation strategies vis-à-vis each other is not clear. Relying on marketing literature may be useful to address this issue (Cable & Turban, 2001; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Indeed, job seekers make similar choices about jobs as consumers about high-involvement products (such as buying a house) and persuading individuals is central to both recruitment and marketing (Cable & Turban, 2001). We specifically propose that the structural alignment theory may help to evaluate which of the two differentiation strategies from literature on employer branding is the most effective.

**Structural alignment theory**

The structural alignment theory (Markman & Gentner, 1993a, b) has been used to explain how consumers process information and, hence, what the most effective way is to differentiate an organization’s products and services from those of competitors (for a review, see Markman & Loewenstein, 2010). According to this theoretical framework, choosing between options or developing a preference for an option entails a comparison process characterized by structural alignment and mapping, which means that individuals look for correspondences between options (Markman & Gentner, 1993a, b; Markman & Medin, 1995; Medin et al., 1995). This comparison process yields commonalities (i.e., options have identical values on shared, corresponding attributes), alignable attributes (i.e., options have values that vary along shared, corresponding attributes), and non-alignable attributes (i.e., options have unique attributes that have no correspondence in the other option; e.g., Gentner & Markman, 1994; Markman & Gentner, 1993a, 1996). To illustrate, consider employment offer 1 characterized by Brussels as location, a salary of 2500 euros, and a company car on the one hand and employment offer 2 characterized by Brussels as location, a salary of 2100 euros, and travelling on the other hand. In this example, location is the commonality, salary the alignable attribute, and company car and travelling the non-alignable attributes.
Because individuals search for correspondences when comparing options and alignable attributes are linked to these correspondences whereas non-alignable attributes are not, individuals would pay more attention to alignable attributes (e.g., salary in the example) than non-alignable attributes (e.g., company car and travelling in the example; Markman & Gentner, 1993b, 1997; Markman & Loewenstein, 2010). Furthermore, alignable attributes can be easily and directly compared across options whereas non-alignable attributes cannot (Zhang & Fitzsimons, 1999). In sum, the structural alignment theory predicts that alignable attributes have stronger effects than non-alignable attributes because alignable attributes get more attention and are easier to compare.

In line with this prediction, research indicates that alignable attributes are better recalled than non-alignable attributes (Lee & Lee, 2007; Mather et al., 2005; Zhang & Markman, 1998) and are also more mentioned when justifying choices (Kivetz & Simonson, 2000; Markman & Medin, 1995). In addition, organizations are preferred over others when their products perform better on attributes shared with products of competitors (i.e., alignable attributes) but not when their products offer superior unique attributes compared to their competitors’ products (i.e., non-alignable attributes; Sun et al., 2012; Zhang & Markman, 1998). Drawing from the structural alignment theory and empirical evidence for its predictions, we hence expect that:

**Hypothesis 1.** The differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better (i.e., alignable attributes) will have a stronger positive effect on job seekers’ preference than the differentiation strategy of offering something unique (i.e., non-alignable attributes).

**Work experience**

We further propose that job seekers’ work experience may determine what differentiation strategy has the strongest positive effect on preference. Work experience is generally described as events experienced by individuals that are related to the performance of jobs (Quinones et al., 1995). Prior research has shown that job seekers’ work experience may affect the type of employment offer related information that is processed and evaluated. Inexperienced job seekers’ perceived organizational attractiveness, for instance, was more affected by non-content-related information in job ads (i.e., physical attractiveness of people depicted in the ad) whereas experienced job seekers’ perceived organizational attractiveness was more influenced by the content of job advertisements (i.e., the quality of statements; Walker et al., 2008).

In line with these findings, we specifically expect job seekers’ work experience to moderate the effects of differentiation strategy on preference. First, job seekers with more work experience may experience less difficulties or uncertainty when evaluating employment offers than job seekers with little work experience. Job seekers with more work experience may indeed have faced actual work situations with different levels of attributes and hence know to a better extent what different levels of attributes entail (Feldman & Arnold, 1978; Kristof-Brown et al., 2002). In contrast, job seekers with little work experience may have less of an idea about what a certain level of an attribute is. Secondly, dual process theories such as the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the heuristic-systematic model of persuasion (Chaiken et al., 1989; Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Chaiken & Trope, 1999), argue that differences in uncertainty may cause differences in motivation to process information and hence also in the type of information that is processed. Applied to alignable and non-alignable attributes, Sun et al. (2012) hypothesized and found that individuals focus more on alignable attributes and less on non-alignable attributes when they feel less uncertain. Therefore, we hypothesize that the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better (i.e., alignable attributes) will have a stronger positive effect on job seekers’ preference than the differentiation strategy of offering something unique (i.e., non-alignable attributes) as job seekers’ work experience increases. The following hypothesis is formulated:

**Hypothesis 2.** Work experience will moderate the effect of differentiation strategy on job seekers’ preference in such a way that the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better (i.e., alignable attributes) will have a stronger positive effect on preference than the differentiation strategy of offering something unique (i.e., non-alignable attributes) as job seekers’ work experience increases.

**Study 1**

**Method**

**Sample and design**

Our sample consisted of 213 job seekers who were recruited through a high-quality online panel. On average the participants were 42.57 years (SD = 10.61) and had 17.55 years of work experience (SD = 10.73). Of the participants 51.20% were men, 94.80% were ethnic majorities, and 58.70% had a bachelor degree or higher. Most participants were employed full-time (62.00%) or part-time (12.70%) and all participants consulted job ads at least occasionally, demonstrating their relevance as a sample of job seekers.

The study used a 2 (attribute score: worse vs. better than average) by 2 (attribute type: alignable vs. non-alignable) between-subjects design with work experience as the potential moderator variable and preference as the dependent variable.

**Development of study materials**

In a preliminary study, we developed and tested study materials. First, we searched for attributes with an equally strong relationship with preference to exclude that our findings would be attribute specific and could be explained by differences in attribute importance. Because challenge (p = .39), development opportunities (p = .42), and image (p = .39) have approximately the same meta-analytic correlation with applicant attraction (Uggerslev et al., 2012), these three attributes were selected.

Secondly, we created sets of two employment offers (see Table 1 for examples). Each set of employment offers consisted of a target employment offer (i.e., the offer we are interested in) and a filler employment offer that allowed to manipulate the (non-)alignability of attributes. The target employment offer was always described using two attributes (i.e., one commonality and one manipulated attribute), whereas the filler employment offer...
was characterized with one attribute (i.e., the commonality) in the non-alignable condition and two attributes (i.e., the commonality and the manipulated attribute) in the alignable condition. In the alignable condition, both the description of the target and the filler employment offer mentioned something about the manipulated attribute. The filler employment offer always performed average on that attribute whereas the target employment offer performed lower (i.e., worse than average condition) or higher than average (i.e., better than average condition). In the non-alignable condition, only the description of the target employment offer mentioned something about the manipulated attribute. More specifically, the target employment offer was described as performing lower (i.e., worse than average condition) or higher than average (i.e., better than average condition) on that attribute. In total, we created 12 sets of two employment offers (i.e., three attributes for the manipulated attribute by two levels of attribute score by two levels of attribute type).

Thirdly, we conducted a pilot study \( N = 24; 91.70\% \) women; 95.80% ethnic majorities; age: \( M = 26.79 \) years, \( SD = 2.52 \); work experience: \( M = 4.12 \) years, \( SD = 2.09 \) to test whether (a) better than average levels of attributes were perceived as more attractive than average levels, (b) average levels of attributes were perceived as more attractive than worse than average levels, and (c) the alignable and non-alignable attributes in the sets of employment offers were perceived accordingly. First, using a policy capturing design, participants rated how attractive they found employment offers on a 5-point Likert scale \( (1 = \text{not at all attractive}; \ 5 = \text{very attractive}) \). The results showed that for each attribute the better than average levels (utility for challenge: \( .468, SE = .066 \); for development opportunities: \( .315, SE = .066 \); for image: \( .606, SE = .066 \)) were perceived as more attractive than the average levels (utility for challenge: \( .134, SE = .066 \); for development opportunities: \( .079, SE = .066 \); for image: \( .051, SE = .066 \)), which in turn were perceived as more attractive than the worse than average levels (utility for challenge: \( -.602, SE = .066 \); for development opportunities: \( -.394, SE = .066 \); for image: \( -.657, SE = .066 \)). Secondly, participants indicated for each set of two employment offers whether the manipulated attribute was an alignable or a non-alignable attribute. Definitions of an alignable attribute (i.e., “An attribute is alignable when each employment offer has the attribute and each employment offer has a different value for the attribute”) and a non-alignable attribute (i.e., “An attribute is non-alignable when only one employment offer has the attribute”) were provided. Findings indicated that alignable attributes were more often perceived as alignable than non-alignable, whereas non-alignable attributes were more often perceived as non-alignable than alignable (all \( p \)'s < .001).

### Procedure and measures
After giving their informed consent, participants were shown one set of two employment offers (i.e., the target and filler employment offer were presented at the same time). The left-right presentation of the target and the filler employment offer was counterbalanced. Participants then indicated their preference for the target employment offer on a 6-point Likert scale \( (1 = I \text{ definitely do not prefer this employment offer}; 6 = I \text{ definitely prefer this employment offer}) \). One item was used for measuring job seekers’ preference because single item measures are recommended for measuring concrete attributes (i.e., preference) of concrete objects (i.e., employment offers; Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007; Rossiter, 2002). Finally, age (in years), gender \( (0 = \text{man}, 1 = \text{woman}) \), ethnicity \( (0 = \text{ethnic majority}, 1 = \text{ethnic minority}) \), education level \( (0 = \text{low}, 1 = \text{high}) \), working full-time/part-time \( (0 = \text{part-time, 1 = fulltime}) \), work experience (in years), and consulting job ads regularly \( (0 = \text{no}, 1 = \text{yes}) \) were administered.

### Analyses
First, we checked whether the left-right presentation of employment offers and the kind of attribute (i.e., challenge, development opportunities, and image) affected job seekers’ preference with two one-way ANOVA’s. Secondly, we performed a hierarchical linear regression using 5000 bootstrapped samples to test the hypotheses. In the first step, age was entered as a control variable since work experience is studied as an important individual difference (see Walker et al., 2008). In the second step, the main effects of attribute score, attribute type, and work experience were added. We entered the interaction between the experimental variables (i.e., attribute score and attribute type) in the third step (i.e., to test Hypothesis 1). In the fourth step, we added the two-way interaction between attribute score and work experience and the two-way interaction between attribute type and work experience. Finally, we added the three-way interaction between attribute score, attribute type, and work experience in the fifth step (i.e., to test Hypothesis 2).

### Results
Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables, whereas Table 3 shows the results of the hierarchical linear regression. Neither the left-right presentation of employment offers, \( F(1, 212) = .002, p = .968 \), nor the kind of attribute, \( F(2, 212) = .610, p = .544 \), affected job seekers’ preference.

Hypothesis 1 stated that the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better (i.e., alignable attributes) would have a stronger positive effect on job seekers’ preference than the differentiation strategy of offering something unique (i.e., non-alignable attributes). As Table 3 shows, the third step of the hierarchical regression added significantly to the explained variance \( (ΔR^2 = .015, p = .029) \) over and above age (Step 1) and attribute score, attribute type, and work experience (Step 2). Thus, the interaction between attribute score and attribute type was significant, \( b = -.700, p = .029 \), and explained 1.5% incremental variance in the model. Figure 1 indicates that alignability strengthens the effect of attribute score on preference. Along these lines an examination of the simple slopes showed that attribute score had a stronger positive effect on

### Table 1. Examples of study 1 study materials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute type: alignable</th>
<th>Target employment offer</th>
<th>Filler employment offer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commonality</td>
<td>Rather good location</td>
<td>Rather good location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignable attribute</td>
<td>More challenge than average</td>
<td>Average level of challenge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute type: non-alignable</th>
<th>Target employment offer</th>
<th>Filler employment offer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commonality</td>
<td>Rather good location</td>
<td>Rather good location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-alignable attribute</td>
<td>More challenge than average</td>
<td>Average level of challenge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hierarchical regression for job seekers

**Step 1:**
- **Age (years):**
  - Prediction: stronger preference for the non-alignable better job
  - Prediction: stronger preference for the alignable better job with higher age
  - Prediction: stronger preference for the alignable better job with lower age

**Step 2:**
- **Attribute score**
  - Prediction: stronger preference for the alignable better job
  - Prediction: stronger preference for the non-alignable better job

**Step 3:**
- **Attribute type**
  - Prediction: stronger preference for the alignable better job
  - Prediction: stronger preference for the non-alignable better job

**Step 4:**
- **Work experience**
  - Prediction: stronger preference for the non-alignable better job

**Step 5:**
- **Job preference**
  - Prediction: stronger preference for the alignable better job
  - Prediction: stronger preference for the non-alignable better job

Note: The values in the table are the unstandardized regression weights (b) and their 95% confidence intervals [low, high].

* = worse than average; 1 = better than average. ** 0 = alignable; 1 = non-alignable. N = 213.

*p < .05; ** p < .01.
job seekers’ preference when the attribute was alignable ($b = 1.992, t = 8.735, p < .001$) than when it was non-alignable ($b = 1.292, t = 5.837, p < .001$). Hence, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 further postulated that work experience would moderate the effect of differentiation strategy on job seekers’ preference in such a way that the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better (i.e., alignable attributes) would have a stronger positive effect on preference than the differentiation strategy of offering something unique (i.e., non-alignable attributes) as job seekers’ work experience increases. However, the fifth step of the hierarchical regression did not add significantly to the explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .002, p = .391$). This implies that the three-way interaction between attribute score, attribute type, and work experience was not significant and thus Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

**Discussion**

Given the intensifying war for talent, researchers agree that employers need to differentiate themselves from their competitors to become the employer of choice (Collins & Kanar, 2014). However, recruitment literature on job choice does not consider differentiation strategies and recruitment literature on employer branding is not clear about what differentiation strategy (i.e., offering something unique or offering the same yet better) is more effective. Study 1 aimed to address this by testing the two possible differentiation strategies vis-à-vis each other through the theoretical lens of the structural alignment theory. Specifically, we investigated whether job seekers’ preferences were more positively affected by the differentiation strategy of offering something unique (i.e., non-alignable attributes) or more by the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better (i.e., alignable attributes) and whether this depended on job seekers’ work experience. Our findings show that alignable attributes have a stronger positive effect on job seekers’ preference than non-alignable attributes. This effect was, however, not moderated by job seekers’ work experience. Taken together, these results suggest that the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better had in general stronger positive effects than the differentiation strategy of offering something unique. Study 2 aimed to further test our hypotheses in more complex judgement and decision-making situations, as further explained below.

**Study 2**

Study 1 supported predictions of the structural alignment theory, but only investigated lowly complex judgement and decision-making situations as the sets of employment offer differed on only one attribute that was alignable or non-alignable, relative information about attributes was provided, and job seekers evaluated employment offers separately. Judgement and decision-making situations may, however, be more complex. First, employment offers may differ from each other on more than one attribute and alignable and non-alignable attributes may occur simultaneously. Secondly, although employers sometimes provide relative information about attributes (e.g., “We offer more challenge than competitors”), they typically provide absolute information about attributes (e.g., “We offer a lot of challenge”). Finally, as comparative thinking is typically human and individuals tend to engage in comparative thinking during judgement and decision-making (Mussweiler & Epstude, 2009; Posten & Mussweiler, 2017), job seekers may evaluate employment offers vis-à-vis each other rather than in isolation in competitive labour markets (Theurer et al., 2018). Hence, the goal of Study 2 was to test our hypotheses in highly complex judgement and decision-making situations.

**Method**

The method used in Study 2 was a somewhat more complex yet commonly used method in marketing research regarding the effects of alignable and non-alignable attributes on judgement and decision-making (see Lee & Lee, 2016, and Sun et al., 2019 for examples).

**Sample and design**

Our sample consisted of 261 job seekers (different than those in Study 1) who were also recruited through a high-quality online panel (i.e., similar approach as in Study 1). Participants’ mean age was 34.13 years ($SD = 5.33$) and mean work experience was 10.03 years ($SD = 6.12$). Sixty per cent of the participants were men, 94.60% were ethnic majorities, and 58.60% had a bachelor degree or higher. Most participants were employed full-time (77.40%) or part-time (13.40%) and all participants consulted job ads at least occasionally, demonstrating their relevance as a sample of job seekers.

The study used a single factor within-subjects design (employment offer: alignable better vs. non-alignable better) with work experience as the potential moderator variable and preference as the dependent variable.

**Development of study materials**

To test our hypotheses, we developed sets of two employment offers using the same attributes as in Study 1 (i.e., challenge, development opportunities, and image). Each set of employment offers (see Table 4 for an example) was designed in such way that one employment offer within the set performed better on the alignable attribute (i.e., the alignable better employment offer) whereas the other employment offer performed better on the non-alignable attributes (i.e., the non-alignable better employment offer). Each employment offer within each

**Table 4. Example of study 2 study materials.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commonality</th>
<th>Alignable better employment offer</th>
<th>Non-alignable better employment offer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commonality</td>
<td>Rather well-known organization</td>
<td>Rather well-known organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive image</td>
<td>A lot of development opportunities</td>
<td>Negative image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few challenges</td>
<td>Rather good location</td>
<td>Rather good location</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The alignable better employment offer is the alignable better employment offer because it performs better on the alignable attribute (i.e., image). The non-alignable better employment offer is the non-alignable better employment offer because it performs better on the non-alignable attribute (i.e., development opportunities).
set was described with four attributes: one alignable attribute, one non-alignable attribute, and two commonalities. In total, we created six sets of two employment offers (i.e., three attributes for the alignable attribute by two attributes that can be the non-alignable better attribute).

In our pilot study (N = 24; 91.70% women; 95.80% ethnic majorities; age: M = 26.79 years, SD = 2.52; work experience: M = 4.12 years, SD = 2.09; see Study 1), we additionally tested for the six sets of two employment offers of Study 2 whether (a) the alignable and non-alignable attributes on the one hand and (b) the alignable better and non-alignable better employment offers, on the other hand, were perceived accordingly. For each of the six sets of two employment offers, participants first indicated whether they considered each of the attributes (i.e., challenge, development opportunities, and image) as an alignable or a non-alignable attribute. Secondly, participants indicated which of the two employment offers within the set performed best on the alignable and the non-alignable attribute(s). Findings indicated that the alignable attributes, non-alignable attributes, alignable better employment offers, and non-alignable better employment offers in all sets of employment offers were perceived as intended (all p’s < .001).

Procedure and measures

The same procedure and measures as in Study 1 were used. The only difference was how the dependent variable was measured. In this study, participants indicated their preference for one employment offer versus the other on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = I definitely prefer employment offer 1, 6 = I definitely prefer employment offer 2) after seeing the two employment offers (see Study 1 for the rationale for using a single item measure). This variable was recoded to a scale from 1 (strong preference for the non-alignable better employment offer) to 6 (strong preference for the alignable better employment offer). As explained later, this scoring has the analytical convenience that a mean score above 3.50 (i.e., the midpoint of the scale) implies a preference for the alignable better employment offer whereas a mean score below 3.50 means a preference for the non-alignable better employment offer. The left-right presentation of the alignable better employment offer and the non-alignable better employment offer was counterbalanced.

Analyses

As in Study 1, we first checked whether the left-right presentation of employment offers and the kind of attribute (i.e., challenge, development opportunities, and image) affected job seekers’ preference with two one-way ANOVA’s. Job seekers’ preference was measured relatively on a scale from 1 (strong preference for the non-alignable better employment offer) to 6 (strong preference for the alignable better employment offer). A mean score above 3.50 (i.e., the midpoint of the scale) hence indicates a preference for the alignable better employment offer whereas a mean score below 3.50 means a preference for the non-alignable better employment offer. The way we measured preference in Study 2 has implications for the testing of our hypotheses. First, Hypothesis 1 could be examined by testing whether the mean preference significantly differs from 3.50 (e.g., via a one sample t-test). This approach was, however, not possible in our study because the left-right presentation of employment offers affected job seekers’ preference (see Results) and we hence wanted to evaluate the effect of employment offer on preference controlling for left-right presentation. Therefore, we effect coded the variable left-right presentation (i.e., -1 = alignable better employment offer/ non-alignable better employment offer, +1 = non-alignable better employment offer/alignable better employment offer), entered it in the first step of the hierarchical regression, and examined whether the intercept of that step differed significantly from 3.50 by checking if 3.50 was within the 95% confidence interval around the intercept. This is a valid way of testing Hypothesis 1 as the intercept represents the grand mean (in this case the mean of the means of both left-right presentation conditions) when a categorical variable (in this case left-right presentation) is effect coded.

Secondly, and as a result of how preference was measured, we tested Hypothesis 2 by looking at the main effect of work experience. Moderation effects are traditionally investigated by checking whether or not interaction terms are significant. However, marketing studies that build upon the structural alignment theory and use an experimental design involving a relative preference measure have tested interactions involving two variables by examining the significance of main terms. Sun et al. (2019, Study 1A), for instance, investigated whether self-regulatory orientation (i.e., promotion vs. prevention) moderates the effect of alignable and non-alignable attributes on consumers’ preference by testing the main effect of self-regulation orientation on a relative preference measure (see Lee & Lee, 2016, and Malkoc et al., 2005 for other examples).

In sum, to test Hypothesis 1 and 2, we conducted a hierarchical linear regression using 5000 bootstrapped samples with left-right presentation in the first step (i.e., to test Hypothesis 1), age in the second step (see Study 1), and the main effect of work experience in the final step (i.e., to test Hypothesis 2).

Results

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables, whereas Table 5 shows the results of the hierarchical linear regression. Preliminary analyses showed that the left-right presentation of employment offers had an effect on job seekers’ preference, F(1, 260) = 8.544,
We, therefore, controlled for the left-right presentation preference, $F(2, 260) = .825, p = .439$

Hypothesis 1 postulated that the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better (i.e., alignable attributes) would have a stronger positive effect on job seekers’ preference than the differentiation strategy of offering something unique (i.e., non-alignable attributes). As the intercept was 3.406 and its standard error .074, the 95% confidence interval around the intercept of Step 1 was [3.261; 3.551]. The midpoint of the scale (i.e., 3.50) lies within this 95% confidence interval which means that the intercept does not differ significantly from 3.50. Hence, on average, job seekers preferred neither the alignable better employment offer nor the non-alignable better employment offer. Hypothesis 1 was thus not supported.

Hypothesis 2 stated that work experience would moderate the effect of differentiation strategy on job seekers’ preference in such a way that the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better (i.e., alignable attributes) would have a stronger positive effect on preference than the differentiation strategy of offering something unique (i.e., non-alignable attributes) as job seekers’ work experience increases. The third step of the hierarchical regression analysis added significantly to the explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .017, p = .033$) over and above the influence of the left-right presentation of employment offers (Step 1) and age (Step 2). Thus, the effect of work experience was significant, $b = .036, p = .035$, and explained 1.7% incremental variance in the model. Supporting Hypothesis 2, job seekers’ preference for the alignable better (vs. non-alignable better) employment offer increased with .036 (on a 6-point Likert scale) for each extra year of work experience job seekers have.

**Discussion**

Study 2 indicated that in general job seekers do not prefer alignable better employment offers over non-alignable better employment offers or non-alignable better employment offers over alignable better employment offers when judgement and decision-making situations are highly complex. However, job seekers increasingly preferred the alignable better employment offers as their work experience increased. These findings add to the recruitment literature as they indicate that employers should take into account the type of job seekers they want to attract when determining their differentiation strategy. General study findings (Studies 1 and 2) and their implications are discussed in the next section.

**General discussion**

Being the employer of choice is of utmost importance given that labour markets are increasingly characterized by a war for talent (ManpowerGroup, 2018) and organizations’ competitive advantage might highly depend on their human capital resources (Brymer et al., 2014; Ployhart & Kim, 2014). The present paper aimed at improving the understanding of an important but remarkably underexplored way of becoming the employer of choice in recruitment literature on job choice and employer branding, namely on differentiation strategies for employment offers. Building upon the structural alignment theory (Markman & Gentner, 1993a,b), we addressed the effectiveness of differentiation strategies for employment offers by evaluating whether offering something unique (i.e., non-alignable attributes) or offering the same yet better (i.e., alignable attributes) had a stronger positive effect on job seekers’ preference and whether this depended on job seekers’ work experience. Overall, our findings extend the literature in two ways. First, findings demonstrate support for the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better and the application of the structural alignment theory to employment offers. Secondly, they add to the recruitment literature by showing that the effectiveness of differentiation strategies for employment offers depends on job seekers’ work experience (i.e., an individual difference characteristic) as well as the complexity of judgement and decision-making situations (i.e., a contextual characteristic).

First, the structural alignment theory posits that offering the same yet better (i.e., alignable attributes) would have stronger positive effects on job seekers’ preferences as alignable attributes would get more attention and are easier to compare (e.g., Markman & Gentner, 1993b; Zhang & Fitzsimons, 1999). Our findings showed that in lowly complex judgement and decision-making situations the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better (i.e., alignable attributes) had stronger positive effects on job seekers’ preference than the differentiation strategy of offering something unique (i.e., non-alignable attributes; Study 1). In highly complex judgement and decision-making situations, however, neither of the two differentiation strategies had in general stronger positive effects on job seekers’ preferences (Study 2). These results partially corroborate the predictions from the structural alignment theory and thus indicate that the theory applies to employment offers (i.e., recruitment) in addition to products and services (i.e., marketing). Furthermore, our findings provide support for the empirical operationalization of differentiation in employer branding research (i.e., offer the same yet better), but not for its conceptualization of differentiation (i.e., offer something unique). Future recruitment research should explore this to a further extent.

Secondly, and in line with what Wilden et al. (2010) argued, our findings indicate that work experience is important to take into account when deciding what differentiation strategy to use. Our results more concretely show that job seekers with different levels of work experience are differently affected by the two differentiation strategies in highly complex (Study 2) but not in lowly complex (Study 1) judgement and decision-making situations. In highly complex judgement and decision-making situations, the differentiation strategy of offering the same yet better (i.e., alignable attributes) had a stronger positive effect on preference than the differentiation strategy of offering something unique (i.e., non-alignable attributes) as job seekers’ work experience increased. Along these lines, Walker et al. (2008) found that different types of information (i.e., the quality of statements and the physical attractiveness of people depicted in job ads) differently affected job seekers depending on their work experience. Contrary to the widely accepted assumption that findings from recruitment studies can be generalized from job seekers with little work experience to job
seekers with more work experience (Breaugh, 2013), the effectiveness of differentiation strategies may thus depend on the type of job seekers employers want to attract. Answering to a further extent the call of Ployhart et al. (2017) to focus attention more on for whom recruitment strategies work, future research could investigate the role of other individual level characteristics (e.g., age; see Goldberg et al., 2013) to get a more complete picture of what individual level characteristics should be taken into account when employers decide how to differentiate their employment offers from those of competitors.

Finally, our results suggest that the complexity of judgement and decision-making situations might also be relevant to consider when deciding on how to differentiate employment offers. Indeed, the effects of differentiation strategy and work experience cannot be generalized from lowly to highly complex judgement and decision-making situations or the other way around. One possible explanation for the different findings in lowly and highly complex judgement and decision-making situations may be that participants experienced different levels of uncertainty regarding the evaluation of employment offers (see Sun et al., 2012). In the less complex judgement and decision-making situations, it was clear whether the target employment offer was interesting or not. However, in the highly complex judgement and decision-making situations, both employment offers had advantages and disadvantages making it less obvious whether an employment offer was interesting or not. Participants may hence have experienced more uncertainty about the evaluation of employment offers in the highly complex than in the lowly complex judgement and decision-making situations. The highly complex judgement and decision-making situations may however not have been sufficiently complex to elicit high enough levels of uncertainty to show a preference for the differentiation strategy of offering something unique. Judgement and decision-making situations may be even more complex than those in Study 2, for instance, when employers differ from each other on more attributes. Moreover, the uncertainty experienced by job seekers with low and high levels of work experience in the lowly complex judgement and decision-making situations may not have differed much, resulting in no effect of work experience.

To the best of our knowledge, the effectiveness of differentiation strategies for employment offers has not been considered much in recruitment research. This is one of the first studies that considered this by building upon the structural alignment theory and, hence, by clearly distinguishing two possible differentiation strategies (i.e., offering something unique and offering the same yet better) and testing them vis-à-vis each other. However, we also acknowledge that our studies are not without limitations.

**Research limitations and opportunities**

First, we selected job and organizational attributes that have an equally strong relation with preference. This approach implied that we did not start from attribute taxonomies such as the three implicit content theories (Behling et al., 1968) or the instrumental-symbolic framework (Lievens & Hightouse, 2003) when selecting attributes. Note, however, that the kind of attribute did not have an effect. Yet, future research could select attributes with an attribute taxonomy in mind and investigate whether different groups of attributes require different differentiation strategies.

Secondly, because the required number of years of work experience is typically mentioned in job ads and taken into account by recruiters at the initial screening stages (Quinones et al., 1995; Swider et al., 2015; Tsai et al., 2011), we also measured the quantitative component of work experience (i.e., time-based measure). Work experience has, however, also been defined in qualitative (i.e., type-based measures such as job complexity) and mixed quantitative/qualitative ways (e.g., density or the intensity of experiences; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998). Yet, given the initial stage of this line of research, we wanted to control for as many confounding variables as possible and decided to not present information about the type of job (e.g., a job title or a job description) in our stimulus materials. The qualitative component of work experience was hence hard to operationalize. In a next step, however, research could include information about, for instance, the type of job in the stimulus materials to more fully understand the role of work experience and to examine the effects of the quantitative, qualitative, and mixed quantitative/qualitative components of work experience in relation to differentiation strategies for employment offers.

Thirdly, we propose that the differential effects of differentiation strategies and work experience on job seekers’ preference in lowly and highly complex judgement and decision-making situations might depend on the level of uncertainty job seekers experience. However, we did not measure the level of uncertainty that job seekers experience and, hence, did not test whether uncertainty actually drives the observed effects. Sun et al. (2012) already showed in a consumer context that uncertainty (partially) mediated the effect of alignable versus non-alignable attributes on purchase likelihood, brand evaluation, and brand preference. In line with these findings and the call of Lievens and Slaughter (2016) to directly test underlying mechanisms, we urge future research to measure uncertainty as a potential underlying mechanism.

Finally, although our participants were all job seekers, there were no real employment offers at stake which might have tempered the effects of differentiation strategy and work experience on job seekers’ preference. We proceeded as such because we wanted to control for as many confounding variables as possible regarding the effects of differentiation strategy and work experience. Future research could test our hypotheses to a further extent in a field study in which real employment offers are at stake.

**Practical implications**

Our findings suggest that offering the same yet better may be a more effective differentiation strategy, particularly when employers look for highly experienced job seekers (i.e., an individual difference variable) in highly complex judgement and decision-making situations (i.e., a contextual variable). First, and in line with Dineen and Solits (2010), we argue that employers should benchmark and find out what their competitors offer. Secondly, employers should establish an employment offer that offers the same as competitors yet better and thus allows to differentiate from competitors. Finally, employers should communicate in a clear way how their employment offer differentiates from that of their competitors to ensure that
the job seekers they are looking for (e.g., highly experienced job seekers), perceive the differentiation as intended. Job seekers’ perceptions, beliefs, and associations with employers are indeed considered the stepping-stones of their attitudes, intentions, and behaviours (Theurer et al., 2018). Backhaus (2004), however, found that employers, in general, provide little information that helps job seekers to differentiate employers from each other. Employers may hence pay more attention to how they communicate their differentiation strategy to job seekers. Taken together, our findings are useful for comparing one’s own recruitment strategy to those of important competitors, and perhaps for considering the redesign of one’s own recruitment strategy to strengthen it.

Conclusion

Offering the same job but better affected job seekers’ preferences more positively than offering something unique in lowly complex judgement and decision-making situations (Study 1) as well as in highly complex judgement and decision-making situations if job seekers had more work experience (Study 2). These findings indicate that differentiation strategies matter: employers should offer the same yet better to become the employer of choice, particularly when they look for highly experienced job seekers in highly complex judgement and decision-making situations. This is one of the first papers that investigates the effectiveness of differentiation strategies in recruitment by building upon the structural alignment theory from the marketing literature. Advancing this line of research, one may further consider how employers best differentiate their employment offers in judgement and decision-making situations with different levels of complexity for different types of job seekers and what mechanisms may explain the observed effects.

Notes

1. Detailed results can be obtained from the first author upon request.
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Disclosure statement

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