

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs) ABOUT REALISTIC JOB PREVIEWS (RJPs)

Michelle I. Graef, Ph.D.
Research Associate Professor
Center on Children, Families and the Law
University of Nebraska - Lincoln
121 S. 13th Street, Suite 302
Lincoln, NE 68588-0227
(402) 472-3479
Email: mgraef1@unl.edu

What is a realistic job preview?

An RJP is a recruitment strategy that provides job applicants with balanced information about the job in an attempt to encourage a better fit between the needs of applicants and the demands of the workplace. Information provided may be positive, negative or neutral in content (i.e., the good, the bad and the ugly!). The RJP can be presented using various media including written, audio/visual or through an in-person conversation with applicants. The purpose is to provide applicants with a true representation of what they will encounter on the job rather than using the traditional recruitment strategy of “selling” the applicant on the position by presenting only positive information. The goal of the RJP, of course, is to reduce the unnecessary turnover of misinformed new hires who quit when reality hits. Applicants are encouraged to self-select out of the hiring process before they and the organization have invested substantial resources into their (ill-fated) hiring and training.

Have RJPs been around for a long time? How widespread is their use in child welfare agencies?

RJPs have a long history of successful use by industrial-organizational psychologists in the public and private sector. In Nebraska, we developed an RJP for use in child welfare in 1997-8 and it was implemented statewide with all applicants for child protective services worker positions from 1998 until mid-2005. It is currently undergoing extensive revision and updating and we hope to have the new version in use this year.

RJPs were identified as one of several promising practices in child welfare recruitment and retention (U.S. GAO report, March 2003). In the last five years several other states have developed their own video-based RJPs for child welfare, including: Arizona, Maine, North Carolina, Michigan, and Georgia. A number of states are currently considering or are in the process of developing an RJP.

How does an RJP work?

Theoretical explanations vary for how RJP's work. One is the theory of "met expectations." According to this theory, job candidates typically have unrealistically inflated expectations about the job and the organization they are considering joining. After entering the organization, there is often a period of time during which these initial expectations are disconfirmed. The resulting dissatisfaction may cause individuals to eventually dislike the job even more than if they had no initial expectations. Staff disillusionment and dissatisfaction lead to organizational turnover. The RJP acts like a medical vaccination in its attempt to deflate newcomer expectations. That is, it is designed to disarm newcomer dissatisfaction rather than reduce it after the fact. The typical medical vaccination injects one with a small weakened dose of the disease so that one's body can develop a natural resistance to the disease. RJP's can be thought of as functioning in a similar manner, by providing the applicant a small dose of "organizational reality."

When is an RJP indicated?

An organizational diagnosis should be conducted to determine whether the need for an RJP exists. An RJP can be a useful intervention if:

- Turnover is a significant issue
- The causes of turnover are due to misinformation or disillusionment with the job
- Significant turnover prevention could be obtained through realistic recruitment
- Expected benefits will outweigh the costs of development and implementation

What are the benefits of an RJP?

- Provides applicants the opportunity to self-select out the selection process at an early stage, prior to extensive investment by the organization or the applicant.
- Reduces the organization's costs of testing, interviewing and training applicants who are unsure about their fit for the job and may quit shortly after starting.
- Improves the fit between applicants and the demands of the job. Applicants are able to make knowledgeable, informed decisions regarding the organization, which can lead to greater commitment and job satisfaction.
- Improves public relations with job applicants and newly hired staff. The organization is viewed as more open, honest and trustworthy.
- Increases job survival of staff who are hired. Remember that an RJP *won't* eliminate all forms of staff turnover, but it can help to reduce much of the preventable turnover.

What guidance does the research literature provide for developing an effective RJP?

Research (see especially work by Wanous) suggests:

- Be proactive! Don't wait until your turnover rates skyrocket to begin developing an RJP
- Use a structured approach to gathering diagnostic data about the organizational situation and job factors to potentially include in an RJP

- Incorporate a moderate (rather than high) level of negativity in the information the RJP presents
- Focus intensively on key factors rather than attempt to provide all pertinent information about the job
- Of the three types of RJP format that have been studied (A/V, written, in-person), audio-visual formats have been found to be most effective
- For your message source, use actual job incumbents instead of actors to convey a high level of credibility
- Provide judgmental (rather than purely descriptive) information about the job
- Implement the RJP as early as possible in the hiring process, before the applicant or the organization has invested in the individual's employment

How do you develop an RJP?

There are a number of key issues to consider in development:

- Choice of medium (written, audio-visual, in person discussion, etc)
- Data gathering method(s)
- Selection of content areas
- Selection of individuals to appear in the RJP
- Optimal length of the RJP
- Pilot testing and feedback process

Our development model has been utilized in two states' video RJP projects (Nebraska and Arizona) and includes these steps:

- Determine organizational need and commitment
 - Identify need for RJP
 - Obtain philosophical, financial, practical commitment
- Organize planning team
 - Recruit and mobilize planning team
 - Develop detailed work plan
 - Structure team to provide review/oversight
- Develop content through structured process
 - Conduct research to determine critical factors
 - Review exit interview data if available
 - Survey recent trainees for common misconceptions, things they wish they'd known, frustrations, rewards
 - Survey subject matter experts (CPS workers and supervisors) to provide examples of critical work incidents
 - Collect staff ratings of critical incidents on two scales:
 - frequency of occurrence
 - positive/negative continuum
 - Determine balance of positive, negative, and neutral content
- Produce video
 - Select video production expert

- Work in partnership on decisions about filming, script development, and editing
- Film interviews with staff discussing selected topics
- Develop narration and video sequences to correspond with narration
- Plan for periodic review and updating of RJP

What do you need to consider when planning the implementation of an RJP?

Some of the issues you will encounter:

- Decide whether RJP viewing will be required and for whom
- Decide when (during the hiring process) applicants will be expected to view the RJP
- Determine the method(s) and location(s) for viewing
- Design a mechanism to confirm applicant viewing, if needed
- Prepare and disseminate a communication plan
- Assess and ensure technical support and resources for implementation

How do you know whether an RJP has made a difference?

Advocate with decision makers to build in a meaningful evaluation of your intervention. Determine the goal(s) of your evaluation and the feasibility of various data collection strategies. You might consider collecting data on:

- Applicant reactions to the RJP itself
- Changes in applicant attitudes about the job and the organization as a result of viewing the RJP
- Increases in applicant knowledge about the job pre- and post- RJP
- Changes in the proportion of applicants who continue in the selection process before and after implementation of the RJP
- Staff turnover rates prior to and after implementation of the RJP

Any other lessons learned?

- Have a project champion in upper management
- Designate a planning team that includes key decision makers who can find resources and put structures into place
- Involve your information technology staff from the beginning
- Know your audience
- If at all possible, use a video producer familiar with child welfare
- Prepare to be actively involved throughout the project
- Need commitment to make evaluation happen
- Steep learning curve: expertise on RJP development and implementation can shorten the process and prevent costly mistakes