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Blaming or taking responsibility? Job seekers' evaluation of employers' response to wrongdoing

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing interest in the psychological processes underpinning job choice, research has not examined how job seekers react to organizational responses to employee wrongdoing. Crisis communication literature suggests that defensive responses, wherein blame is shifted to the culpable employee, can minimize reputational damage. While focusing on various external stakeholders, extant research overlooks job seekers facing uncertainty in selecting the right employer. Drawing upon Situational Crisis Communication Theory, persuasion theory and organizational justice research, we investigate how employers' responses (accommodative vs defensive) to employee wrongdoing influence job seekers' intentions to apply for a job at the organization involved. Over three scenario-based experiments conducted with 648 U.S. job seekers, we show that job seekers prefer employers that are accommodative, accepting responsibility for the wrongdoing, even when a single employee is explicitly culpable. Mediation analysis confirms that accommodative responses lower manipulative intent inferences, which in turn affect expectations of positive treatment from the prospective employer and subsequent willingness to apply. The preference for accommodative responses, however, diminishes when the employer promises investments to improve employee performance and among job seekers with high autonomous motivation. The article contributes to human resource management research by explaining how employers' responses to wrongdoing influence job seekers' decisions.

KEYWORDS

Job seekers; employer branding; talent acquisition; organizational response; employee wrongdoing

Introduction

Episodes of employee wrongdoing are not uncommon. At the British supermarket chain Morrisons, a disgruntled employee leaked the personal payroll data of nearly 100,000 co-workers online. In response,

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Morrisons denied responsibility, claiming that the employee was on a 'personal vendetta' and was not acting in line with the company's values (BBC News, 2017). Responding to employee wrongdoing represents an interesting managerial challenge. On the one hand, consistent with the case above, the organization could claim to be a victim of a rogue individual. On the other, the organization could accept blame for organizational policies that might have contributed to employee wrongdoing. Given the complexity of the phenomenon, understanding what response strategy is most persuasive for specific stakeholders is important for theory and practice.

Extant research has investigated the efficacy of organizational responses to crises and other negative events under different circumstances (e.g. Antonetti & Baghi, 2021; Bundy et al., 2017; Coombs, 2007; Gangloff et al., 2016; Hersel et al., 2023; Raithel & Hock, 2021). Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) has played a critical role in this domain by proposing to align communication efforts to the nature and intensity of crises (Coombs, 2007, 2020). Accordingly, organizations culpable for the wrongdoing should employ accommodative responses that acknowledge responsibility and attempt to rectify the situation. In contrast, when responsibility lies elsewhere, organizations could shift blame through defensive responses. However, research has primarily focused on how crisis responses affect perceptions of external stakeholders, including investors (e.g. Raithel & Hock, 2021) and customers (e.g. Antonetti & Baghi, 2021). There is a knowledge gap concerning whether and how organizational responses influence *job seekers*, their perceptions of prospective employers and their decisions to apply for jobs.

This research gap is notable for two reasons. First, many organizations face chronic understaffing, with unfilled job openings, spikes in voluntary attrition, and an increasingly demanding workforce (Hogarth & McCartney, 2024). Therefore, acquiring talent represents a critical challenge. However, research on talent acquisition mainly focuses on how strategies to promote employers' attractiveness enhance recruitment outcomes (e.g. Highhouse et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2014; Le & Morschett, 2024; Yu & Davis, 2019). For instance, there is evidence that employers with a strong reputation attract more and better-qualified candidates (e.g. Dineen & Allen, 2016; Dineen & Williamson, 2012; Turban & Cable, 2003). However, scholars have not examined how organizations might respond to negative events that are likely to harm employer attractiveness.

Second, job seekers represent a critical and conceptually distinctive stakeholder group for organizations. Given the uncertainty experienced while applying for jobs, job seekers are expected to use heuristics to draw inferences about the character of employers and the expected workplace environment (Adamovic, 2023; Rupp, 2011). Past research shows

that corporate wrongdoing has a negative effect on job seekers' perceptions of the organization (e.g. Antonetti et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). There is, however, no research addressing how employers' response to negative events impacts job seekers and the implications for talent acquisition.

We theorize that job seekers are concerned about fairness when evaluating employers' response to employee wrongdoing (Lind & van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos, 2001). Facing uncertainty about whether employers are trustworthy, job seekers use responses to wrongdoing to gauge organizational justice. The relative fairness of organizational responses – captured by the assessment of the relative manipulative intent behind the message (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000) – is then used heuristically to inform expectations about the likely treatment of employees at the involved organization (Jones et al., 2014). Across three scenario-based experiments conducted with 648 US job seekers, we find that job seekers interpret accommodative responses as fairer than defensive responses, even if the employer is not responsible for the wrongdoing. Accommodative responses are, however, not a silver bullet. We show that accommodative and defensive responses are equally persuasive when accompanied by the employer's promise to invest in employee training. Furthermore, the positive effect of accommodative responses disappears for job seekers with high autonomous motivation who scrutinize the message more closely.

The study makes several contributions to existing research. First, we advance research on talent acquisition (Highhouse et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022) by demonstrating how employers' response to employee wrongdoing affects job seekers' perceptions and intent to apply for a job. We clarify how job seekers infer motives and expected treatment from employers' responses to employee wrongdoing and explain how such inferences have downstream effects on intentions to apply for a job. We also extend current debates in international HRM, which have not yet explored the consequences of organizational responses to negative events as a strategy to promote organizational attractiveness (Le & Morschett, 2024; Yu & Davis, 2019). Second, we add to organizational justice research by demonstrating that employers' responses to negative events inform overall perceptions of organizational fairness. We show that job seekers employ fairness as a heuristic to gauge employers' intent and the expected treatment of prospective employees. Third, we extend research on crisis communications (Bundy et al., 2017; Coombs, 2007; Gangloff et al., 2016) by examining the responses of job seekers, a conceptually distinctive stakeholder group. Our findings demonstrate that past perspectives suggesting that responses should match attributions of responsibility (Coombs, 2007, 2020) do not apply when job seekers evaluate employers' responses to negative events.

Crucially, by revealing that job seekers' reactions vary according to individual characteristics (i.e. autonomous motivation) and perceived costliness of employers' response (i.e. promise of improvement), we extend the crisis communication literature beyond its focus on situational attributions of responsibility.

Conceptual background and hypotheses development

Organizational response to negative events

A notable, interdisciplinary stream of work has examined organizational responses to negative events (e.g. Antonetti & Baghi, 2021; Bundy et al., 2017; Coombs, 2007; Gangloff et al., 2016; Hersel et al., 2023; Raithel & Hock, 2021). The work of Coombs (1998, 2015) on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is seminal in this respect. The SCCT provides a framework of reputation-building responses to organizational crises, differentiating between two overarching responses: accommodative and defensive (Bundy et al., 2017; Raithel & Hock, 2021). Accommodative responses, such as apologies, entail the acceptance of responsibility for the wrongdoing, the expression of regret and a willingness to make amends (Bundy et al., 2017; Ohtsubo & Watanabe, 2009). Defensive responses, such as denial, excuses or scapegoating, involve an attempt to minimize or even deny responsibility for the wrongdoing by shifting blame to a culpable third party (Antonetti & Baghi, 2021; Coombs, 2007).

According to SCCT, the effectiveness of a response rests on whether the message matches the situational responsibility of the crisis attributed by stakeholders (Coombs, 2007; Raithel & Hock, 2021). Therefore, accommodative responses denoting the acceptance of responsibility are recommended when the responsibility is attributed to the organization. For example, apology and monetary compensation are effective when the organization is perceived to be responsible for the negative event (Bundy et al., 2017; Coombs, 2007). By contrast, if responsibility is clearly attributed to an individual actor (i.e. an employee), messages aimed at shifting blame to such an actor can prove effective, at least to the extent that the culpable party is perceived to have acted autonomously (Hersel et al., 2023). In such circumstances, a blame-shifting message targeting a specific individual is expected to shield the organization's reputation. In examining responses to cases of financial misconduct, scholars have shown that organizations can respond to the misconduct by blaming senior managers for their lack of effective leadership (Gangloff et al., 2016). Convergent experimental evidence shows that, in situations where there is low ambiguity about the causes of wrongdoing and where the organization does not appear to be directly responsible, shifting blame to a specific employee helps to minimize reputational damage (Antonetti & Baghi, 2021).

Extant crisis management research has focused on how organizational responses to negative events affect perceptions of external stakeholders such as investors (e.g. Raithel & Hock, 2021) and customers (e.g. Antonetti & Baghi, 2021). There is comparatively less evidence on how job seekers evaluate prospective employers' response to wrongdoing, particularly when no objective evidence suggests that the employer is blameworthy. To fill this gap, we examine employee wrongdoing as a negative event that affects the talent acquisition efforts of employers. Such a negative event can, in fact, negatively impact employers' efforts to enhance the attractiveness of the workplace (Wang et al., 2022).

Recruitment research has long explored the factors that increase the relative attractiveness of a company as a potential employer (e.g. Dineen & Allen, 2016; Dineen & Williamson, 2012; Turban & Cable, 2003). A key insight from this body of work is that job seekers are concerned about the genuine motives of a prospective employer and the expected future treatment (Highhouse et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2014). As job pursuit is a high involvement decision (Baum & Kabst, 2013), we expect job seekers to project themselves as future employees when evaluating employers' crisis communications. We focus on explaining how employers' responses to cases of employee wrongdoing sway job seekers' evaluations of prospective employers and their intent to apply for a job.

Job seekers' inferences about employers' motives

Organizational responses to episodes of employee wrongdoing represent persuasive communication that seeks to improve how job seekers perceive the negative event (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Research on individual reactions to persuasive messages, such as those from salespeople and/or advertisements, has often examined persuasion knowledge (e.g. Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; DeCarlo, 2005; Isaac & Grayson, 2017; Kirmani & Zhu, 2007), namely *'knowledge about the tactics used in persuasion attempts'* (Friestad & Wright, 1994: 1). As organizational messages tend to be persuasive, persuasion knowledge is typically activated. Persuasion knowledge directs the attention of receivers toward particular features of a message and/or enables to anticipate the negative effects of a persuasive message (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Heightened persuasion knowledge can generate suspicion about the ulterior motives of the communicator, thereby inciting scrutiny of the message (Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004) and diminishing its persuasiveness (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000).

Given that employee wrongdoing represents a negative event, we expect employer responses to be interpreted as persuasion attempts to influence stakeholders in line with organizational goals. Consistent with persuasion theory reviewed above, persuasion knowledge might prompt

job seekers to scrutinize employers' responses to employee wrongdoing and make inferences about employers' motives. Often aware of the persuasive techniques employed by organizations, job seekers are likely to evaluate persuasion attempts with skepticism (Campbell, 1995; Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022). It follows that, if messages are perceived to influence the audience too aggressively and/or unfairly, job seekers could be prone to infer the manipulative intent of the employer (Campbell, 1995).

Following employee wrongdoing, wherein responsibility clearly lies with a single individual (i.e. an employee), previous SCCT research would suggest that shifting blame to the culpable party (i.e. a defensive response) would be an effective approach (e.g. Antonetti & Baghi, 2021; Coombs, 2007; Raithel & Hock, 2021). As postulated by SCCT, stakeholders judge wrongdoing based on perceptions of situational responsibility, prioritizing a desire to be correct about where responsibility for the negative event lies. In contrast, we posit that job seekers are primarily concerned about minimizing uncertainty, thus tend to prefer accommodative responses from employers, even when such responses are not justified by the circumstances surrounding the negative event. In their job pursuit efforts, job seekers face uncertainty and generally lack information about whether to trust employers (Rupp, 2011). Uncertainty heightens even further following negative events, which question the reputation of employers. Due to elevated uncertainty, job seekers are especially sensitive to information providing evidence of organizational fairness (Adamovic, 2023).

Research on organizational justice (or fairness) has long been concerned with the study of employees' perceptions in the workplace (Colquitt, 2001). Workplace studies have discussed fairness in relation to pay outcomes, decision-making procedures, respectful treatment and honest communication (e.g. Adamovic, 2023; Colquitt, 2001; Gopinath & Becker, 2000). We propose that organizational responses to employee wrongdoing are used by job seekers as evidence of organizational justice (Rupp, 2011). We expect accommodative responses denoting the employer's attempt to take blame for the employee's wrongdoing to be perceived as indicative of organizational justice. Accommodative responses eliminate a worst-case reading of the employer's intentions (Bies & Shapiro, 1987) and convey the employer's genuine motives, care for employees, and the impression of a supportive work environment (Breaugh & Starke, 2000). Fairness associated with accommodative responses is employed as a heuristic to gauge the intent of employers. As employers accept blame, accommodative responses are unlikely to be perceived as manipulative, thus leading to lower inferences of manipulative intent than defensive responses. By contrast, defensive responses, where employers shift blame to the culpable employee, are expected to be evaluated with suspicion. By shifting blame, the organization conspicuously attempts to persuade

stakeholders that responsibility lies with individual actors, not with the organization. Job seekers are expected to be critical of such a persuasion attempt and to perceive it as unfair (Coombs, 2007). Thus, we hypothesize that:

H1: Following episodes of employee wrongdoing, an accommodative (vs. defensive) response of employers will lower inferences of manipulative intent by job seekers.

Manipulative intent raises suspicion of unfair treatment of employees

Research on organizational justice shows that individuals react to how others are treated (also referred to as third-party justice, Rupp, 2011). Employees, for instance, react to the actions taken by the organization (or on behalf of it) and directed toward external groups and communities (Rupp, 2011). In a similar way, we expect job seekers to form perceptions about how prospective employers treat their employees. Given the uncertainty involved in applying for a job with a seemingly attractive employer, job seekers are motivated to establish organizational fairness (Lind & van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos, 2001). Accordingly, job seekers use their judgment on the relative fairness of the response to the wrongdoing heuristically to build expectations about the quality of the treatment received by employees of the affected organization (Colquitt, 2001). Manipulative intent, as indicative of the employer's lack of genuine concern for matters of fairness and employees' well-being, suggests that the employer has a questionable character and is likely to treat employees unfairly.

We posit that, following employee wrongdoing, job seekers pay attention to how fairly employers are likely to treat future employees. If employers are believed to be driven by manipulative intent, job seekers expect unfair treatment in the future. The reverse will apply if employers' communication efforts elicit weak inferences of manipulative intent. Given prior research suggesting that expectations of treatment explain the attractiveness of an organization for job seekers (Highhouse et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2022), we propose a sequential mechanism with a potential impact on intentions to apply for a job. Specifically, accommodative responses are expected to lower manipulative intent, which will, in turn, improve perceptions of expected treatment. Expected treatment is then positively associated with intentions to apply for a job at the involved organization. Formally, we hypothesize that:

H2: The effect of an accommodative (vs. defensive) response to employee wrongdoing on job seekers' willingness to apply for a job is sequentially mediated by inferences of manipulative intent and expectations of future treatment.

Autonomous motivation increases the persuasiveness of defensive responses

The extent to which job seekers make inferences of manipulative intent is dependent on individual motivation. A central tenet of persuasion theory is that attitudinal and/or behavioral change varies according to one's motivation and ability to process persuasive messages (Chaiken, 2014). When motivation and ability are low, judgment is based on heuristics, namely, quick short-cuts to evaluate information and reach decisions. In contrast, motivated individuals who put greater effort into understanding a persuasion attempt show more systematic processing of the message (Petty et al., 1981). We posit that job seekers' motivation, and the associated cognitive processing of information, affects propensity to draw inferences of manipulative intent.

The importance of individual motivation has been acknowledged in organizational studies (e.g. da Motta Veiga & Gabriel, 2016; Kanfer et al., 2001; Van den Hee et al., 2020). The literature refers to self-determined motivation, which is a dynamic self-regulated process to perform tasks and achieve goals (da Motta Veiga & Gabriel, 2016). Motivation can range on a continuum from autonomous (i.e. intrinsic to the individual's goals and values) to controlled (i.e. extrinsic and driven by changes in the environment; da Motta Veiga & Gabriel, 2016). Evidence suggests a link between autonomous motivation and job search effort, especially at early stages of job pursuit (e.g. da Motta Veiga & Gabriel, 2016; Wanberg et al., 1999).

We argue that job seekers with *low* autonomous motivation tend to process employers' responses to employee wrongdoing heuristically, thus utilizing limited cognitive resources to evaluate the message of a prospective employer. It follows that job seekers with low motivation are likely to accept accommodative responses at face value, on the grounds that the employer's acceptance of blame is fair, and indicative of benevolence and care for staff (Ohtsubo & Watanabe, 2009). In contrast, we expect job seekers with *high* autonomous motivation to engage in detailed processing of employers' messages. Accordingly, motivated job seekers scrutinize the employer's response to employee wrongdoing, assess its relevance, and form a judgment accordingly. For motivated job seekers, the differential advantage of accommodative responses might therefore disappear. This group of job seekers focuses less on fairness and more on whether employers' responses present a strong argument (Petty et al., 1981). Furthermore, given that the individual employee is evidently culpable for the wrongdoing, motivated job seekers might interpret accommodative responses as excessive and unlikely to conform to the attributions of situational responsibility concerning the wrongdoing (Raithel & Hock, 2021). Such a group of job seekers might perceive

defensive responses as more acceptable. It follows that the difference between defensive and accommodative responses, in terms of manipulative intent (consistent with H1), is likely to weaken (strengthen) when autonomous motivation is high (low). Hence, we hypothesize that:

H3: Autonomous motivation moderates the effect of an accommodative (vs. defensive) response on job seekers' inferences of manipulative intent so that the effect is stronger (weaker) when autonomous motivation is low (high).

Promise of improvement increases the persuasiveness of defensive responses

Past research has focused particularly on demonstrating that the persuasiveness of accommodative responses can be bolstered through the addition of costly compensation or reparation efforts valued by stakeholders (Ohtsubo & Watanabe, 2009). We propose that, following employee wrongdoing, prospective employers could ameliorate job seekers' perceptions of the company by adding a promise of improvement to their response. Employers might, for instance, promise to invest in employee training to enhance the wrongdoer's performance and prevent the incident from re-occurring. A promise of improvement represents a tangible action aimed at bolstering the initial (accommodative or defensive) response (Coombs, 2007; Hersel et al., 2023). By suggesting the employer's engagement with the wrongdoer, the promise of improvement addresses fairness concerns (Adamovic, 2023; Ohtsubo & Watanabe, 2009).

The image of care for employees that promises of improvement convey is expected to heighten job seekers' appreciation for a defensive response. A promise of improvement communicates a desire to improve employees' performance, leading to perceptions that the defensive response is less manipulative and rather comparable to an accommodative response for two reasons. First, willingness to invest in employees' professional development communicates an implicit (partial) admission of responsibility for the wrongdoing. Accordingly, a defensive response that includes a promise of improvement is fairer toward the culpable employee (Hersel et al., 2023). Second, a promise of improvement shows care for employees and a forgiving character of employers, which weakens the suspicion of manipulative intent (Antonetti & Baghi, 2021; Campbell, 1995). Accordingly, we expect that job seekers will perceive accommodative and defensive responses in similar terms when a promise of improvement is present. We, therefore, hypothesize that:

H4: A promise of improvement moderates the effect of an accommodative (vs. defensive) response on job seekers' inferences of manipulative intent so that the effect is stronger (weaker) when the promise of improvement is absent (present).

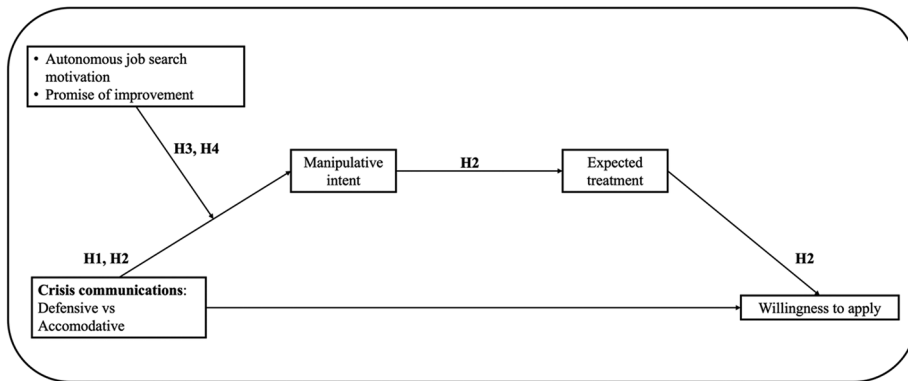


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Figure 1 summarizes the hypotheses tested in this research.

Study 1: the positive effect of accommodative (vs. defensive) responses

Research design and sample

To test H1 and H2, we conducted a single-factor, between-subjects, scenario-based experiment with organizational response manipulated at two levels (accommodative vs. defensive)¹. We recruited 204 job seekers (59% female, mean age 38) in the United States from the Prolific online panel (Peer et al., 2022). Participants actively looking for a job were pre-screened by Prolific. We also added a screening question in the survey confirming that job searches were still ongoing at the time of the study. An instructional attention check verified that participants were carefully reading the instructions (Oppenheimer et al., 2009). All participants correctly answered the attention check.

Stimuli and procedure

We gave all participants a job fair brochure featuring three fictitious employers. To enhance realism, we asked the participants to read the description of multiple potential employers, consistent with past research (e.g. Jones et al., 2014). To increase the relevance of job adverts, we informed participants that the featured employers were recruiting to fill positions across different business units. Participants imagined having the chance to forward their curriculum vitae to any of the featured employers. After reading the brochure, participants were presented with a news report describing a case of product contamination at one of the companies featured in the brochure. The

contamination was caused by employee wrongdoing and resulted in the manufacturing of a contaminated product. Next, participants read the company's official response to the wrongdoing and answered our questions. The survey lasted approximately 10 min and participants received \$1 for their participation.

In the accommodative response condition, the employer apologizes for the wrongdoing, the negligence of the employee, and any harm caused to consumers. In the defensive response condition, the company takes no responsibility and shifts blame to the employee accountable for the wrongdoing (see detailed scenarios in [Supplementary Appendix A](#)). The two conditions were randomly assigned to participants, such that each participant saw one condition only. Prior to the main study, a pre-test confirmed that the wrongdoing was easy to understand and organizational responses were interpreted as desired (see methodology and results of the pre-test in [Supplementary Appendix B](#)). Hence, we used the pre-tested scenarios in the main study.

We employed six items as manipulation checks to assess our experimental stimuli; three items for accommodative responses (sample item: *'the company apologized for the actions of the employee'*, $\alpha = 0.95$) and three items for defensive responses (sample item: *'the company shifted blame to the employee for the scandal'*, $\alpha = 0.92$), all measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Results show that the manipulation functioned as desired (accommodative response: $M_{\text{accommodative}} = 5.48$, $M_{\text{defensive}} = 3.43$; $t(202) = 11.08$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.55$; defensive response: $M_{\text{accommodative}} = 5.43$, $M_{\text{defensive}} = 6.23$; $t(202) = -4.49$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.63$).

In the main study, we checked for realism and clarity, including one item for response realism (e.g. *'very realistic/not very realistic'*) and one item for clarity (e.g. *'very unclear/very clear'*); both on a 7-point Likert-type scale. The organizational response conditions did not differ in terms of realism ($M_{\text{accommodative}} = 4.71$, $M_{\text{defensive}} = 4.49$, $t(202) = 1.51$, $p > 0.05$, $d = 0.21$) and clarity ($M_{\text{accommodative}} = 5.37$, $M_{\text{defensive}} = 5.22$, $t(202) = 1.56$, $p > 0.05$, $d = 0.11$), ruling out potential alternative explanations for the results (i.e. that the accommodative response might simply be clearer or more realistic).

Measures

We borrowed scales from prior literature. We used four items for willingness to apply for the job (Hansen & Schnittka, 2018; $\alpha = 0.89$), five items for manipulative intent (Campbell, 1995; $\alpha = 0.91$) and four items for expected treatment (Jones et al., 2014; $\alpha = 0.98$). All measures were

on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. We also collected demographics, including gender, age, and education, which were later used as covariates. All scales performed satisfactorily (see [Supplementary Appendix C](#) for detailed items, loadings and reliability estimates).

Results

Independent samples *t*-tests show that accommodative response increases willingness to apply for the job ($M_{\text{accommodative}} = 3.42$, $M_{\text{defensive}} = 2.96$; $t(202) = 2.32$, $p = 0.022$, $d = 0.32$), reduces inferences of manipulative intent ($M_{\text{accommodative}} = 3.86$, $M_{\text{defensive}} = 5.21$; $t(202) = 7.68$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -1.07$) and increases expected treatment ($M_{\text{accommodative}} = 3.85$, $M_{\text{defensive}} = 2.97$; $t(202) = 4.69$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.66$). We tested the hypothesized sequential mediation mechanism in PROCESS (Model 6; Hayes, 2018), with 10,000 resamples for the estimation of confidence intervals (CIs) using bias-corrected and accelerated bootstraps. The independent variable was coded 0 (defensive) and 1 (accommodative). Age, gender, and education were included as covariates². When compared with a defensive response, an accommodative response lowers inferences of manipulative intent (effect = -1.35 , 95% CI -1.69 to -1.00). Manipulative intent, in turn, reduces expected treatment (effect = -0.60 , 95% CI -0.72 to -0.47), which enhances willingness to apply for the job (effect = 0.68 , 95% CI 0.55 to 0.81). Findings show the significant effect of accommodative response on willingness to apply for the job through the serial mediation of manipulative intent and expected treatment (effect = 0.62 , 95% CI 0.35 to 0.91). [Figure 2](#) illustrates simple and indirect effects.

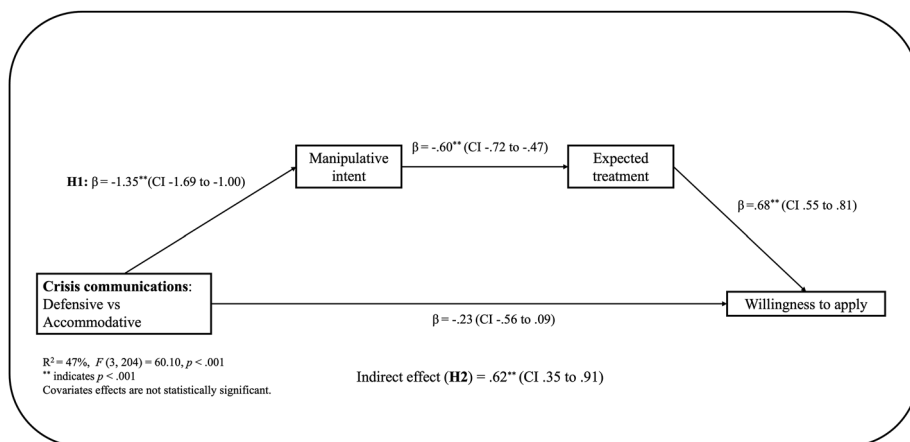


Figure 2. Serial mediation model (Study 1).

Discussion

Our results find support for H1 and H2. We show that accommodative responses motivate job seekers to apply for a job at the organization affected by employee wrongdoing. Accommodative responses are perceived as less manipulative than defensive responses. Lower inferences of manipulative intent associated with accommodative responses translate into perceptions that the employer will treat future employees fairly, and in turn, willingness to apply for a job.

Study 2: the moderation of employer's promise of improvement and job seekers' autonomous motivation

Research design and sample

To test H3 and H4, we conducted a preregistered study involving two waves of data collection. Details of the preregistration are available here: https://aspredicted.org/QZV_VKJ. We recruited 300 U.S. job seekers (52% male, 48% female; mean age 42) on Prolific. Participants who were actively looking for a job were prescreened by Prolific. We also checked their status at the beginning of the survey. In the first wave, participants completed a survey on autonomous motivation. The second wave took place a week later. At this time, we confirmed the job-seeking status of all participants. We ran a 2 (organizational response: defensive vs. accommodative) $\times$ 2 (promise of improvement: without promise vs. with promise) between-subjects experiment, which was completed by 244 job seekers (52% male, 48% female; mean age 43). We retained the instructional attention check from Study 1, which was successfully completed by all participants.

We used the procedures discussed in Study 1, and participants evaluated the same employee wrongdoing. We manipulated the employer's response (defensive vs. accommodative) and the promise of improvement (absence vs. presence). The four conditions were randomly assigned to participants. Finally, job seekers assessed our constructs, manipulation checks, and demographics. The survey lasted approximately 10 min, and participants received \$1 for their participation.

Stimuli and measures

We retained the manipulations of the accommodative and defensive response used in Study 1. In the promise of improvement condition, participants read about the employer's promise of improvement, which consisted of additional training courses for employees to prevent further wrongdoings. This description was absent in the condition without promise of improvement (see [Supplementary Appendix A](#) for more details).

We used six items as a manipulation check for organizational response. The manipulation of organizational responses was successful (accommodative response: $M_{\text{defensive}} = 4.48$, $M_{\text{accommodative}} = 5.41$, $t(244) = -4.60$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.59$; defensive response: $M_{\text{defensive}} = 5.97$, $M_{\text{accommodative}} = 4.17$, $t(244) = 9.24$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.19$). We also checked the manipulation of promise of improvement with two items measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (e.g. the company ‘*offers help to the employee to improve their performance*’ and ‘*is investing in employee training to avoid similar incidents in the future*’). Results were consistent with expectations ($M_{\text{without improvement}} = 2.79$, $M_{\text{with improvement}} = 5.19$, $t(244) = -12.19$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -1.56$). We also found no interaction between the manipulation of organizational responses and promise of improvement on perceptions of accommodative ($F(1, 244) = 1.32$, $p > 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.05$) and defensive response ($F(1, 244) = 1.47$, $p > 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$). In the first wave of data collection, we measured job search motivation using six items from da Motta Veiga and Gabriel (2016), measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale. Three items tapped into autonomous motivation (e.g. ‘*I value this job search*’) and three items captured controlled motivation (e.g. ‘*I need to start getting paid*’). All other measures were retained from Study 1. All scales performed satisfactorily (see [Supplementary Appendix C](#)).

Results

We conducted a 2×2 ANOVA with organizational response (defensive, accommodative) and promise of improvement (with, without) as between-subjects factors and manipulative intent as dependent variable. The analysis shows a significant interaction effect on manipulative intent ($F(1, 244) = 14.85$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$). In the absence of a promise of improvement, accommodative responses are perceived as less manipulative than defensive responses ($M_{\text{accommodative}} = 3.81$, $M_{\text{defensive}} = 4.85$, $t(121) = -4.70$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.85$). However, when the employer introduces a promise of improvement, accommodative and defensive responses are comparable in terms of manipulative intent ($M_{\text{accommodative}} = 3.89$, $M_{\text{defensive}} = 3.71$, $t(121) = -0.79$, $p > 0.05$, $d = 0.14$). Running the same ANOVA with expected treatment as dependent variable shows a significant and positive main effect of organizational response ($M_{\text{defensive}} = 3.15$, $M_{\text{accommodative}} = 4.07$, $F(1, 244) = 27.21$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.10$) and a positive main effect of promise of improvement ($M_{\text{without improvement}} = 3.22$, $M_{\text{with improvement}} = 3.99$, $F(1, 244) = 18.41$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$). The interaction effect, however, is not statistically significant ($F(1, 244) = 1.84$, $p > 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$). Finally, concerning willingness to apply for a job, the ANOVA shows a significant main effect of both

organizational response ($M_{\text{defensive}} = 3.03$, $M_{\text{accommodative}} = 3.52$, $F(1, 244) = 7.25$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.08$) and promise of improvement ($M_{\text{without improvement}} = 2.88$, $M_{\text{with improvement}} = 3.66$, $F(1, 244) = 15.65$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$).

To test H3 and H4, we ran a conditional effect analysis using PROCESS (Model 83; Hayes, 2018) following the procedures from Study 1. We estimated two separate models, first testing for the moderation of autonomous motivation and then the moderation of promise of improvement. In both estimations, we retained manipulative intent and expected treatment as serial mediators. The independent variable was coded as 0 (defensive) and 1 (accommodative). Age, gender, and education were included as covariates³. Figure 3 presents the simple effects of the model estimated. Results show a significant interaction of organizational response X autonomous motivation ($\beta = 0.49$, 95% CI 0.23 to 0.74). The effect of accommodative response on inferences of manipulative intent is significant for low (-1 SD – effect: -1.07 , 95% CI -1.53 to -0.61) and average levels of autonomous motivation (effect: -0.45 , 95% CI -0.77 to -0.13). The same effect, however, is not statistically significant when autonomous motivation is high⁴ ($+1$ SD – effect: -0.17 , 95% CI -0.29 to 0.62). A Johnson-Neyman analysis (Spiller et al., 2013) shows that the moderation of autonomous motivation on inferences of manipulative intent is significant for values below 5.42 and for a large share of the distribution of this variable (56%). When autonomous motivation is low or average, the serial mediation of manipulative intent and expected treatment on willingness to apply for the job is supported. Accommodative response lowers inferences of manipulative intent, with downstream consequences on expected treatment and willingness to apply, consistent with a

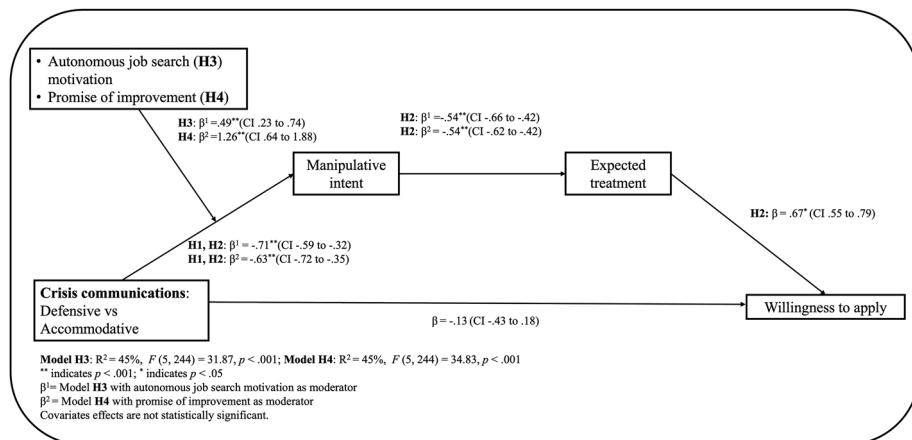


Figure 3. Serial moderated mediation model (Study 2).

sequential mediation effect. However, the effect of accommodative response is not significant when autonomous motivation is 1 SD above the mean. Table 1 summarizes all conditional indirect effects at the value of the moderator.

We ran the conditional effect analysis again (Model 83; Hayes, 2018) using promise of improvement as a moderator. The moderator variable was coded as 0 (without promise of improvement) and 1 (with promise of improvement). Age, gender, and education were included as covariates⁵. Figure 3 shows the simple effects for the model estimated. Results of the regression model support the significant interaction of organizational response X promise of improvement ($\beta=1.26$, 95% CI 0.64 to 1.88). When the promise of improvement is absent, an accommodative response reduces manipulative intent and increases expected positive treatment. The serial mediation is supported, leading to a significant increase in willingness to apply for the job. When employers promise improvements, the ability of accommodative responses to lower manipulative intent is not significant and the serial mediation is not supported. The conditional indirect effects and the index of moderated mediation are reported in Table 1.

Discussion

Consistent with H1, the findings show that job seekers prefer employers who are accommodating in their response to employee wrongdoing. Accommodative responses are perceived as less manipulative than defensive ones, conveying organizational justice and a benevolent engagement with the incident (Antonetti & Baghi, 2021; Coombs, 2007). Notably, organizational justice portrayed *via* accommodative responses results in positive expectations of future treatment (H2) and job seekers' willingness to apply for a job at the affected employer. In line with H3, the preference for accommodative responses is evident among job seekers with low autonomous motivation, who tend to process employers' messages heuristically (Petty et al., 1981). Such a preference disappears among job seekers with high autonomous motivation, who scrutinize employers' responses. Consistent with H4, the superior effect of accommodative responses weakens when the employer promises to invest in its employees. By promising to help the wrongdoer to perform more effectively, the employer is showing fairness, care and genuine interest in addressing the incident (Ohtsubo & Watanabe, 2009).

As reported in the preregistration documentation, however, the hypothesis concerning the effect of job search motivation was explicitly formulated after Study 2. Consequently, consistent with guidelines on the use of preregistrations (Van't Veer & Giner-Sorolla, 2016), we conducted an

Table 1. Conditional indirect effects (Study 2 and Study 3).

Estimated paths	Study 2				Study 3			
	High autonomous motivation (+1 SD)	Average autonomous motivation	Low autonomous motivation (–1 SD)	Promise of improvement	No promise of improvement	High autonomous motivation (+1 SD)	Average autonomous motivation	Low autonomous motivation (–1 SD)
H3								
Organizational responses → Manipulative intent	β, 95% CI 0.06, CI –0.26 to 0.12	β, 95% CI –0.45, CI –0.77 to –0.13	β, 95% CI –1.07, CI –1.53 to –0.61	N/A N/A	N/A N/A	β, 95% CI 0.04, CI –0.57 to 0.40	β, 95% CI –0.65, CI –1.03 to –0.27	β, 95% CI –1.26, CI –1.80 to –0.73
Organizational responses → Manipulative intent → Expected treatment	0.06, CI –0.05 to 0.19	0.19, CI 0.02 to 0.38	0.53, CI 0.27 to 0.83	N/A	N/A	0.03, CI –0.12 to 0.21	0.17, CI .05 to 0.33	0.35, CI 0.16 to 0.61
Organizational responses → Manipulative intent → Expected treatment → Willingness to apply for the job	0.09, CI –0.07 to 0.24	0.16, CI 0.04 to 0.30	0.37, CI 0.26 to 0.61	N/A	N/A	0.01, CI –0.11 to 0.13	0.13, CI 0.04 to 0.26	0.25, CI 0.11 to 0.46
<i>Index of moderated mediation</i>		–0.18, CI –0.31 to –0.07			N/A		–0.10, CI –0.17 to –0.03	
H4								
Organizational responses → Manipulative intent	N/A N/A	N/A N/A	N/A N/A	β, 95% CI 0.18, CI –0.26 to 0.61	β, 95% CI –1.09, CI –1.52 to –0.65	N/A N/A	N/A N/A	N/A N/A
Organizational responses → Manipulative intent → Expected treatment	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.09, CI 0.32 to –0.14	0.55, CI 0.31 to 0.83	N/A	N/A	N/A
Organizational responses → Manipulative intent → Expected treatment → Willingness to apply for the job	N/A	N/A	N/A	–0.07, CI –0.23 to 0.10	0.39, CI 0.20 to 0.61	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>Index of moderated mediation</i>		N/A			–0.46, CI –0.74 to –0.21		N/A	

Bold font indicates statistically significant effects.

additional empirical study to formally test the moderation of job search motivation (details are available here: https://aspredicted.org/TDC_JZR).

Study 3: replication of the moderation of autonomous job search motivation

Research design and sample

We conducted a preregistered one-factor (crisis communication: defensive vs. accommodative) between-subjects, scenario-based experiment with 200 U.S. job seekers (51% male, 49% female; mean age 42) from Prolific. The screening of participants was consistent with Study 1 and Study 2. At the beginning of the survey, we collected job search motivation using items from Study 2. We adopted the procedures and scenarios employed in Study 2. We manipulated organizational response as defensive vs. accommodative. Job seekers answered questions about our constructs, manipulation checks and provided demographic information.

Stimuli and measures

The manipulation of organizational response was consistent with Studies 1 and 2 and the design included the randomization of experimental conditions. We used the manipulation check measures adopted in previous studies, and results were consistent with our expectations (accommodative response: $M_{\text{accommodative}} = 5.07$, $M_{\text{defensive}} = 4.02$, $t(198) = 4.57$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.53$; defensive response: $M_{\text{accommodative}} = 3.95$, $M_{\text{defensive}} = 5.96$, $t(198) = -9.50$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -1.16$). As in Study 2, a week prior to the experiment, participants completed a job search motivation scale. We retained the measures from previous studies. All scales performed satisfactorily (see [Supplementary Appendix C](#)).

Results

Independent samples t-tests show that accommodative response increases willingness to apply for the job ($M_{\text{accommodative}} = 3.56$, $M_{\text{defensive}} = 2.97$, $t(198) = 2.10$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.42$), reduces inferences of manipulative intent ($M_{\text{accommodative}} = 3.89$, $M_{\text{defensive}} = 4.49$, $t(198) = -2.68$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.38$) and increases expected positive treatment ($M_{\text{accommodative}} = 4.03$, $M_{\text{defensive}} = 3.05$, $t(198) = 3.73$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.52$).

To test H3, we ran a conditional effect analysis using PROCESS (Model 83; Hayes, 2018) following the procedures from Study 2. The independent variable was coded as 0 (defensive) and 1 (accommodative). Age, gender, and education were included as covariates⁶.

Figure 4 presents the simple effects of the model estimated. Results confirm a significant interaction of organizational response X autonomous

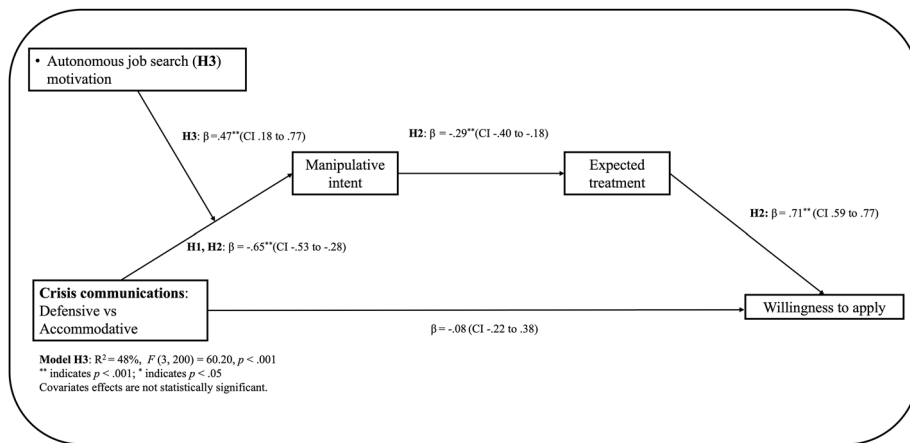


Figure 4. Serial moderated mediation model (Study 3).

motivation ($\beta = 0.47$, 95% CI 0.18 to 0.77). The effect of accommodative response on inferences of manipulative intent is significant for low (-1 SD – effect: -1.21 , 95% CI -1.74 to -0.70) and average levels of autonomous motivation (effect: -0.58 , 95% CI -0.96 to -0.20). The same effect, however, is not statistically significant when autonomous motivation is high⁷ ($+1$ SD – effect: -0.11 , 95% CI -0.62 to 0.40). A Johnson-Neyman analysis (Spiller et al., 2013) shows that the moderation of autonomous motivation on inferences of manipulative intent is significant for values below 5.70 and for a large share of the distribution of this variable (61%). When autonomous motivation is low or average, accommodative response lowers inferences of manipulative intent, with downstream consequences on expected treatment and willingness to apply for a job, and the sequential mediation effect is supported. However, the effect of accommodative response is not significant when autonomous motivation is 1 SD above the mean, and the serial mediation is not supported. Table 1 summarizes all conditional indirect effects at the value of the moderator.

Discussion

The findings are consistent with those presented in Study 2, providing further support for H4. In line with previous studies, we find that accommodative responses increase willingness to apply through the mediation of inferred manipulative intent and expected treatment.

General discussion

Theoretical implications

Our article presents four notable theoretical contributions. First, the study advances international HRM research by uncovering how

employers can mitigate the detrimental consequences of negative events undermining organizational attractiveness. Past research primarily focused on explaining how employers convey their attractiveness to enhance recruitment outcomes (Highhouse et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2014; Le & Morschett, 2024; Yu & Davis, 2019). Extant research has not yet considered, however, how organizations can effectively mitigate the effects of negative events like employee wrongdoing that can undermine their attractiveness as employers. We demonstrate that, when confronting cases of employee wrongdoing, accommodative responses are more efficacious than defensive responses.

A second contribution of our paper lies in extending talent acquisition research on how job seekers interpret employers' responses to wrongdoing and the implications for job pursuit decisions. Prior research on talent acquisition established the negative impact of corporate wrongdoing on job seekers' perceptions of organizations, especially those that are less dominant in the marketplace (Antonetti et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). There is, however, a knowledge gap concerning how job seekers, which represent a distinctive stakeholder group, interpret organizational *responses* to wrongdoing where an employee is culpable, but the employer is not. Our paper is the first to empirically address this gap by examining the psychological processes underlying the job pursuit decisions of job seekers exposed to employers' responses to employee wrongdoing. While existing research informed by SCCT might lead to hypothesizing that defensive responses would be more suitable to this type of negative event (Antonetti & Baghi, 2021; Coombs, 2007; Raithel & Hock, 2021), we show that this is not the case when job seekers' evaluations are considered. Job seekers scrutinize how fairly employers treat their employees, especially following negative events such as employee wrongdoing (Lind & van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos, 2001). Job seekers prefer accommodative responses, which are perceived as less manipulative and are indicative of fair employee treatment.

Third, our paper contributes to organizational fairness research by demonstrating that responses to negative events are leveraged by job seekers to infer the fairness of employers' treatment of employees, which is conducive to job applications. Research on organizational justice has long been concerned with the study of employees' justice perceptions in the workplace (Colquitt, 2001). This research stream shows that, beyond looking inside at how fairly employees view themselves as being treated, employees also observe how fairly others, inside or outside the organization, are treated (Rupp, 2011). We propose that justice (or fairness) concerns are also relevant to job seekers, prior to joining an organization. Motivated by the desire to find a caring employer, job seekers act as observers of how fairly employers treat others, especially following

negative events such as employee wrongdoing (Lind & van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos, 2001). Our paper shows that relative perceptions of manipulative intent associated with organizational responses to wrongdoing are used to infer employers' fairness in treating existing and prospective employees.

Fourth, our paper advances research on crisis communications by demonstrating that the guiding principle of aligning communication efforts to the type and intensity of crises, as originally postulated in SCCT (Coombs, 2007, 2020), is not always efficacious for organizations. In fact, adaptation to the targeted stakeholder group is required. We focus on a hitherto overlooked stakeholder group, namely job seekers, and demonstrate that this stakeholder group is highly distinctive given the uncertainty surrounding job pursuit decisions (Rupp, 2011), and job seekers' vested interest in looking for a caring employer. Most research on organizational responses to wrongdoing examines the perceptions of an external stakeholder group, whether customers (Antonetti & Baghi, 2021) or investors (Gangloff et al., 2016; Hersel et al., 2023). We note that stakeholder groups differ in their interpretation of organizational messages. Unlike customers, job seekers prefer an overconforming response wherein the employer takes blame even if not culpable (Raithel & Hock, 2021). This suggests that, for job seekers, the image of care and concern projected by a prospective employer is more important than attributions of situational responsibility concerning the wrongdoing.

Managerial implications

Our study presents important managerial implications. To start, we recommend managers to target crisis communications to specific audiences, whether investors, job seekers or customers. Our findings demonstrate that job seekers follow specific mental processes when evaluating employers' response to negative events. When targeting job seekers, we advise employers to ponder the use of accommodative responses even when the organization holds no responsibility for the wrongdoing. Under such circumstances, organizations might be tempted to rely on defensive responses shifting blame to the wrongdoer, so to distance themselves from the negative event. Exemplary is the case of Morrisons described earlier (BBC News, 2017). Interestingly, our paper shows that employers' defensive responses to employee wrongdoing, such as the one employed by the supermarket chain, are ineffective from a talent acquisition perspective. Job seekers prefer accommodative responses, which are perceived as fairer and indicative of a supportive work environment.

Further, we raise managerial awareness about the relevance of job seekers' individual trait of autonomous motivation. Our paper shows that

job seekers with low autonomous motivation are more easily persuaded by accommodative responses. By contrast, job seekers with high autonomous motivation find defensive responses equally acceptable. This insight highlights the need to systematically profile job seekers based on job search motivation to be able to effectively tailor messaging. Employers could capture autonomous motivation when job seekers visit the company's career web page or by adding relevant questions in job application forms (e.g. Moran et al., 2012). Autonomous motivation can also be gleaned during the selection process, for example, when conducting interviews. Knowledgeable that job seekers have high autonomous motivation, employers might employ crisis communications that combine expressions of regret with the disclosure of the individual culpable for the wrongdoing. Accommodative responses can instead be employed with job seekers declaring low autonomous motivation.

We advise against the use of a standalone defensive response and recommend such a strategy in combination with tangible measures aimed at preventing the recurrence of employee wrongdoing. We find that defensive responses are as effective as accommodative ones if employers promise to act upon the wrongdoing by improving internal processes. Promises of improvement concerning training, re-training, or professionally developing staff suggest employers' willingness to prevent further wrongdoings and to help employees acquire essential skills. Crucially, we advise managers to make such investments prominent in the minds of job seekers, for talent acquisition purposes. Operationally, this could include explicitly mentioning planned training programs in recruitment communications, providing examples of procedural changes to ensure accountability, and/or sharing success stories of employees who benefited from professional development programs. By doing so, managers may leverage concrete actions of care and fairness that can improve their attractiveness among prospective employees.

Limitations and areas for further research

Our paper's limitations present avenues for further research. We focused on a single type of wrongdoing (i.e. product contamination), thus enhancing the internal consistency of our studies. Further research is needed to establish the generalizability of findings across other types of wrongdoing. Relatedly, we have not explicitly examined the severity of employee wrongdoing. It seems reasonable to expect that job seekers' tendency to prefer accommodative responses is moderated by severity, so that job seekers are willing to accept blame-shifting responses to egregious cases of wrongdoing caused by employee misbehavior.

Furthermore, our research explores how employer responses impact job seekers at the time of job applications. As candidates go through the recruitment process, their motivation might change. Future research could explore whether job seekers' evaluations of employer responses to wrongdoing vary across different stages of the recruitment process. Similarly, we have not considered individual commitment to a specific employer. Past research shows that, following corporate wrongdoing, job seekers are more lenient toward employers that are dominant in the marketplace (Antonetti et al., 2021). A similar process might be at play when job seekers evaluate how dominant employers respond to episodes of employee wrongdoing.

Finally, we focused on blame shifting as a type of defensive response. However, defensive strategies can also include excuses or justifications that minimize the severity of the negative event (Hersel et al., 2023) or a denial that the wrongdoing occurred (Coombs, 2007). Future research could consider the relative persuasiveness of such defensive responses or even more complex strategies combining multiple defensive responses (Hersel et al., 2023).

Notes

1. The experimental studies were conducted in compliance with ethical standards and approved by the Ethical Committee of an Italian University (04th December 2023; Approval Reference Number: 1745BC).
2. The results do not change if we run the same analysis without covariates.
3. The results do not change if we run the same analysis without covariates.
4. As we also collected the measure of controlled motivation, we evaluated its potential role as a moderator. Results of the regression model show that the interaction of organizational response X controlled motivation is not significant ($\beta = -.01$, 95% CI $-.23$ to $.22$). The mediation is not supported as the superior effect of accommodative response on the reduction of manipulative intent is significant for low (-1 SD – effect: $-.42$, 95% CI $-.80$ to $-.04$), average (effect: $-.43$, 95% CI $-.70$ to $-.16$), and high levels of controlled motivation for job search ($+1$ SD – effect: $-.44$, 95% CI $-.83$ to $-.06$).
5. The results do not change if we run the same analysis without covariates.
6. The results do not change if we run the same analysis without covariates.
7. As we also collected the measure of controlled motivation, we evaluated its potential role as a moderator. Results of the regression model show that the interaction of organizational response X controlled motivation is not significant ($\beta = -.01$, 95% CI $-.23$ to $.22$). The moderation is not supported as the significant effect of accommodative response on manipulative intent is significant for low (-1 SD – effect: $-.42$, 95% CI $-.80$ to $-.04$), average (effect: $-.43$, 95% CI $-.70$ to $-.16$), and high levels of controlled motivation ($+1$ SD – effect: $-.44$, 95% CI $-.83$ to $-.06$).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data used for this research are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

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