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THE COMPARATIVE EFFECTIVENESS OF IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT  
TACTICS ON THE RECOMMENDATION OF GRIEVANT PUNISHMENT:  
AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION

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On the Recommendation of Grievant Punishment:  
An Exploratory Investigation

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## Abstract

This study applied the literatures on extra-legal variables and self-presentation toward an understanding of judgment biases in arbitration. Subjects were provided with a written case of a grievance over the firing of an employee for drinking on the job. The extra-legal variable of previous record was manipulated by providing subjects with a case in which the grievant had previously been drinking on the job or had never done so before. This was crossed with the manipulation of the impression management variable in which the subjects read either the grievant's use of tactics known as an account or an apology. Results showed that the extent to which subjects believed punishment for the grievant was appropriate, as well as ratings of other secondary variables, were differentially affected by an interaction of impression management tactic used, as well as the grievant's previous record.

Arbitration is a process of alternative dispute resolution by which two parties to a dispute jointly select a third to hear and decide the issue. The decision of the third party, or arbitrator, is final and binding upon the disputants engaged in this last step of the grievance procedure. Such grievance procedures are found in essentially all collective bargaining agreements between management and organized labor so as to provide a ready means to resolve the inevitable differences that arise when the parties interpret their agreement or contract.

Previous research in arbitration has focused on the relationship between factors outside the merits of the case and their affect on arbitration awards. This literature, however, has primarily served as a means for optimally selecting an arbitrator via rigorous research of the pool of candidates (see Primeaux & Brannen, 1975). Research on factors external to the case itself have focused on objective factors found in biographical data ( Primeaux and Brannen, 1975; Briggs and Anderson 1980; Bloom and Cavanagh 1986; Nelson 1986), and have shown that experience as an arbitrator is the single most important objective factor in selecting an arbitrator.

Other factors outside the merits of the case can also potentially affect arbitration decisions. For example, biographical data (Heneman and Sandver, 1983) and arbitration experience (Nelson & Curry, 1981) have been found to account for only a small portion of the variance in arbitration decisions. Research is therefore needed on other aspects of the arbitration

process to gain better understanding and prediction of how arbitration decisions are made.

What other components within the arbitration could affect the decisions (awards) made by arbitrators ? Although the appearance of a rather rigid process exists, the literature on forensic decision-making has shown that in the more rigid process of legal adjudication, many factors unrelated to the issues or incidents in question influence the decisions made. Relatedly, it can be argued that while the essential characteristic (with knowledge, ability, and skill assumed) of an arbitrator is impartiality, everyone has some biases and prejudices. Thus, while arbitrators are expected to decide issues on merit alone, it has been suggested that there are discernible standards of judgement or value orientations that influence the decision making process of labor arbitrators (Gross, 1967). These standards of judgement could be affected by the grievant's ability to convey a particular impression of himself or herself on the arbitrator.

#### Impression Management and Forensic Decision Making.

"Impression management" is a term used to describe any action by an individual which aims to control the impression that others have of him or her (see Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980). As such, the use of impression management includes any verbal or non-verbal attempts by a person designed to create a particular image in the eyes of another.

The role that impression management plays in other aspects

of organizational life has been well-documented in a variety of studies (e.g. Wood & Mitchell, 1981; Giacalone, 1985; Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1984). Its role in the process of arbitration has been explored by Giacalone, Pollard, and Brannen (in press), who note that the impression management literature, in combination with that of forensic psychology, could help to explain arbitration decisions.

As a whole, the literature in forensic psychology would suggest that grievant and management actions, as perceived through the eyes of individuals in the organization and arbitration social interactions, will affect the arbitrator's award. Studies suggest that the defendant's actions within the courtroom can create an impression which affects the jury decision. The actions can range from refusal to testify (see Shaffer and Sadowsky, 1979), to testimony which is impertinent or self-aggrandizing (cf. Kalven & Zeisel, 1966).

Related studies find that impressions created by a defendant (e.g. via remorse, regret, or emotional conveyance) may affect the sentence or disposition the defendant receives from the court (see, for example, Savitsky and Sim, 1974; Rumsey, 1976)

A part of the impression created by a grievant may rest with the discussion of the grievant's previous work record. Forensic literature shows that the previous record of offenses with which a defendant enters into the courtroom significantly affects the ultimate decisions made in the case (see Kalven and Zeisel, 1966). Studies show that a previous record may contribute to a

defendant's conviction (Hatton, Snortum, and Oskamp, 1971), with some data showing as much as a 22% greater incidence in prison sentences among felons with prior convictions as compared to those felons without previous records. Relatedly, plaintiffs who sue a defendant with a criminal record win 31% more cases than average, and are awarded 6% more money in damages (Green, 1961).

Together, the literature in these areas provides us with potentially provocative considerations regarding the arbitration process. On the one hand, the forensic literature provides us data which leads us to the conclusion that previous records of offense will render widely divergent judgments regarding a currently existing issue. The impression management literature, however, indicate that the impressions of the particular issue currently in question could be mitigated if the grievant could use an acceptable tactic. Of interest, however, is how the pejorative influence of a grievant's previous record of offenses could be offset by the proper use of impression management techniques.

Present Study. The present study sought to examine the relative efficacy of impression management tactics in mitigating the level of recommended punishment, under conditions in which the grievant possesses differing prior records. It was hypothesized that different impression management strategies could be effective depending on the record of similar offenses that the grievant had prior to the incident in question.

Two different impression management tactics, an apology and



an account (excuse), were used to evaluate the comparative effectiveness of self-presentation for a grievant with similar work history, but a different record of offenses. In the account condition, the grievant offered an excuse for his behavior, and was quoted as saying that the reason for his drinking on the job was alcoholism. In the apology condition, the grievant gave a full apology (see Goffman, 1971) in which he expressed remorse, recognized his wrongdoing, and offered restitution.

It was hypothesized that when individuals with no previous record of similar offenses apologized for their actions, subjects would be less inclined to recommend punishment than when the employee had previous offenses, primarily because the apology would be seen as feigned if the incident had previously occurred.

Conversely, it was hypothesized that an individual with previous offenses would be less likely to be punished if he gave an excuse (i.e. that he was an alcoholic) than if he were to provide the same excuse with no prior offenses. In the latter case, the excuse would seem less credible, because the lack of prior offenses in one with a long work tenure with the company would mitigate the possibility of the individual being an alcoholic.

#### Method

Subjects. Subjects were 57 males and 32 females enrolled in the MBA program of a major northeastern college were asked by their instructors to complete a questionnaire. Of the 89

subjects, 84 were currently working full time, while the rest were employed part-time. Subjects had been working for their present company for an average of 62 months (Md=42 months) and had an average age of 30 (Md=29). Subjects did not receive extra credit toward their course grade or financial remuneration.

Procedure. Subjects were given a small questionnaire packet with the following instructions on the cover sheet:

ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES IS A DESCRIPTION OF AN ARBITRATION CASE BETWEEN A MAJOR COMPANY AND UNION REPRESENTING AN EMPLOYEE. TO MAINTAIN THE ANONYMITY OF THE COMPANY AND EMPLOYEES. ALL NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED.

A MEMBER OF THE FACULTY IS CURRENTLY SERVING AS AN ARBITRATOR IN THIS DISPUTE AND IS SEEKING THE OPINIONS OF NON-ARBITRATORS TO HELP SETTLE IT.

COULD YOU PLEASE READ THE CASE, AND ANSWER THE QUESTIONS WHICH FOLLOW AS HONESTLY AS POSSIBLE. IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN YOUR MAINTAIN YOUR ANONYMITY, PLEASE DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ANYWHERE ON THIS SURVEY.

Each subject was randomly assigned to read one of four descriptions of a modified version of the case used by Bigness and DuBose (1985) in which a company discharges an employee for violating a company rule prohibiting drinking on the job.

The description contained five main sections which were presented concurrently on a typed page. In the first section, the names of the company and the union involved in the grievance are listed. In the background section, the incident was described as follows:

J. Covington had worked since 1968 at the Packaging Corporation of America as a ZA Auto-Taper operator at the Memphis, Tennessee plant which manufactures corrugated shipping containers.

On September 18, 1980, Covington was assigned to work

on a band saw on the first shift. On this same day, Production Manager Jerry Dillings handed out paychecks in the plant. At 9:30 a.m., Dillings walked toward the bank saw and noticed that it was not running. Since the morning break for the first shift ended at 9:10 a.m., Dillings knew that the band saw should have been operating. As he approached the band saw, he noticed that there were three loads and noticed that Covington was kneeling down. He observed that Covington took a drink from a whiskey bottle, put the cap back on and put the bottle of whiskey away. At this time, Dillings approached Covington and said: "Come on. Let's go to the office." They went to the office where plant manager Harder, and chief union steward Crowell, joined them. Covington admitted to what Dillings had observed, and was immediately discharged by the company for violating Rule 2 of the company's Rules of Conduct.

Covington filed a grievance which protested the discharge. The company denied the grievance, and the case eventually was submitted to arbitration.

In the third section, the section titled Position of the Company, the company's stance on the grievance is described as follows:

The company maintained that Covington, by drinking an alcoholic beverage in the plant, had violated long-established work rules in effect for the safety and convenience of all employees. The company pointed out that eleven months before the discharge of Covington two other employees Sam Gieger and Ed Kirk, had been discharged for drinking alcoholic beverages. The company stressed that neither of the two employees nor the union had filed a grievance concerning these two incidents.

Moreover, the company pointed out that on February 9, 1980, Dillings held a meeting with all employees to discuss the problem of drinking alcoholic beverages in the plant; Dillings had warned the employees that the company would take action if this drinking continued. The company pointed out that Covington was at the meeting.

The company further maintained that it had been trying seriously to reduce accidents in the plant as well as to improve the plant safety record. Company efforts in this direction would be in vain if employees drank on the job.

Finally, the company emphasized that Covington should have been working instead of drinking at the time she was caught, since the company's morning break period lasted only until

9:10 a.m.

For all these reasons, the company concluded that Covington was properly discharged for cause. The company requested that the grievance be denied.

In the fourth section, titled Position of the Union, the grievant's record was manipulated by either noting that such an incident had never occurred before, or that he had been caught drinking twice before. Thus, in the condition where the grievant's record had been spotless, the description read:

The union recognized that Covington violated Rule 2 and should be penalized. However, the penalty of discharge was too severe.

The union asserted that Covington was a good worker, and that work attendance had been good. Before this incident occurred, Covington had been reprimanded previously on only one occasion by the company and that was for taking excessive smoking breaks. This reprimand was meted out by a plant foreman, and it subsequently was rescinded and removed from Covington's file in the course of the grievance procedure. The union pointed out that Plant Manager Harder did not remember Covington ever having been disciplined during the five years he had been plant manager. Production Manager Dillings had admitted that, prior to this incident, he had found no cause whatsoever to discipline Covington. Further, the union submitted that the company should have taken into account the fact that Covington had taken only one drink, and had never done anything of this nature during 12 years with the company.

Covington argued that certain other extenuating circumstances should have been considered by the company. On the day of the incident in question, the ventilation around the band saw was very poor, and had gone twice to the water fountain to obtain a drink of water. Covington claimed not to be intoxicated and said mental and physical faculties were not impaired, nor was judgement affected by only one drink. The union pointed out that Covington had had an excellent work record during 12 years of employment, and that all behavior, other than for this offense, had been outstanding.

The union argued that the case differed in several respects from that of former employees Gieger and Kirk, both of whom were under the influence of alcohol at the time they

were discharged, whereas Covington had only a single drink and had full possession of all faculties. Finally, neither Gieger nor Kirk had come to their union steward seeking to file a grievance. The fact that both Gieger and Kirk decided, for reasons known only to them, not to file a grievance should not influence the arbitrator's decision in this instance.

The union requested that the discharge action of the company be rescinded, and that Covington be returned to the job.

In the condition where the grievant had had two previous offenses, however, one sentence in this section of the description was changed as follows:

The union pointed out that Covington had had an excellent work record during 12 years of employment, and that all behavior, other than for two similar infractions of drinking on the job, had been outstanding.

In the final section of the description, titled Covington's Statement, the grievant's record was manipulated and was factorially crossed with either one of two impression management strategies.

In the apology condition, the grievant offered an apology which incorporated all of the components necessary for it to be perceived as an apology (see Goffman, 1971). This section read as follows:

Covington's statement briefly summarized the statements previously made by the union and added: "I am very sorry and embarrassed by what I did. I understand that drinking on the job is wrong, and that I made a mistake. I can only promise that I will never drink on the job again." Covington added that "I am prepared to make restitution to the company for whatever time may have been wasted as a result of my behavior."

In the account condition, the grievant offered an excuse, noting that his drinking on the job was due to a serious alcoholism problem. This section read as follows:

Covington's statement briefly summarized the statements made by the union and added that "The reason why I drank on the job is because I have a serious problem: I am an alcoholic."

Thus, the study was a 2 (previous record/no previous record) X 2 (impression management tactic:apology/account) factorial design.

Following the description, all subjects were asked to respond to the same set of questions. These questions were as follows:

- 1) To what extent do you think that Covington's offense was serious ?
- 2) To what extent do you believe that Covington may engage in actions similar to the one described again ?
- 3) To what extent do you consider Covington a worker who may be dangerous to other workers ?
- 4) To what extent do you believe that the company is responsible for the incident ?
- 5) To what extent do you believe that Covington is responsible for the incident ?
- 6) To what extent do you feel sorry for Covington ?
- 7) To what extent do you believe that Covington's offense should be punished ?

The last dependent variable, the extent to which punishment was believed appropriate, represented the primary dependent variable of the study. Each of the variables were rated on a 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely), with the rating of 4 serving as a neutral midpoint.

While subjects were provided with 30 minutes for participation in the study, all subjects were finished within 20 minutes.

## Results

A 2 (previous record/no previous record) x 2 (impression management tactic:apology/account) ANOVA was performed on each of the dependent variables. The overall results (N, means, and standard deviations) are summarized in Table 1. The results of the main effects for previous record are summarized in Table 2, while the main effects for impression management tactic and interaction effects are summarized in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

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INSERT TABLES 1,2,3 AND 4 ABOUT HERE  
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Main effect of previous record. The main effect of previous record provided an interesting set of results. As might have been predicted, there was no difference in perceived severity of punishment, perceived danger of the grievant, or feeling sorry for the grievant ( $p$ 's of  $>.10$ ). Not surprisingly, subjects felt that the grievant was more likely to commit the offense again when he had three previous offenses ( $p < .035$ ).

Unexpectedly, subjects felt that the company was more responsible for the offense if it had occurred three previous times, than if it had never occurred previously ( $p < .015$ ). Consistent with this, subjects attributed less responsibility to the grievant when three previous offenses had been committed.

Main effect of impression management. Main effect of impression management tactic was significant on three dependent

variables. Subjects who read the apology felt that the grievant's offense was less severe than did those reading the account ( $p < .053$ ). Subjects who were provided with the grievant's account also were more likely to believe that he would do it again ( $p < .001$ ) and that he was more dangerous ( $p < .015$ ) than those who read the apology.

Interaction effects. The interaction effects proved interesting and resulted in effects mostly consistent with predictions.

Subjects recommended less punishment when the grievant gave an account on the third offense as compared to an account on the first offense. However, there were no significant differences between first and third offense recommendations when an apology was provided. Interestingly, it seems that while no differences in recommended punishment are evident for a first offense, the use of an account for a three time offender is clearly advantageous.

Subjects who read the grievant's apology for a first offense were least likely to think that the grievant would do it again, and were least likely to see him as dangerous.

While there was no difference in responsibility of the company, it was clear that grievants who provided an account for a third offense were seen as least responsible for their offense.

Finally, it appeared that the grievant evoked greatest sympathy only when using an account, as opposed to an apology, on the third offense.



## Discussion

The results showed that, as predicted, the use of diverse impression management tactics can mitigate the likelihood of punishment in those conditions in which the grievant's previous record differs. These results concur with those of previous studies (e.g. Giacalone, 1985; Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1986) showing that the use of impression management by employees does not provide mitigation of all predicaments in which they are used. In fact, the data has suggested that in some cases, a less positive perception of the self-presenter is evident as a result of the particular tactic chosen (see Giacalone, 1985).

Certainly, this study examined only two of many variables which could serve as "extra-arbitral" factors, which bias arbitration decisions. The research in organizational behavior, forensic psychology, and social psychology provides us with many other potential variables that may affect the arbitrator's decision making. Within the impression management literature alone, one could argue cogently that individual differences in desire and ability to make situationally appropriate impressions will influence an arbitrator's decisions. Among the individual difference variables associated with impression management, self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974), Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970), and social desirability (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964) would seem likely moderators.

Additionally, as Giacalone, Pollard, and Brannen (in press) point out, the grievant is not the only individual in the

arbitration process who wishes to make a good impression. In fact, a true understanding of impression management in arbitration must include the strategies of witnesses (who may self-present to please the side they are representing), management representatives (who are concerned with the long-term impression that employees will have as a result of the arbitrator's decision), and arbitrators, (who are perhaps most affected by the impressions their own decision make).

Future research will need to address the generalizability of our "paper people" study to the actual use and efficacy of impression management in arbitration. As previous work has shown, some paper people studies may result in larger effect sizes (Murphy, Herr, Lockhart, & Maguire, 1986), leading to the conclusion that the methodology itself, interacting with the variables manipulated, may account for a significant part of the overall effect.

An accurate portrayal of the impact that impression management has on the arbitration process will need to take into account the self-presentations of each of these actors, the effectiveness of their self-presentations, and the respective place that impression management plays on the arbitration process itself.

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Table 1  
Summary Table

	<u>n</u>	<u>M</u>	SD
Severity of Offense	89	4.51	.74
Punishment	89	4.18	.90
Do it Again	89	3.70	1.03
Grievant Dangerous	89	3.80	1.16
Responsibility of Company	88	1.77	.96
Responsibility of Grievant	89	4.56	.69
Sorry for the Grievant	89	3.29	1.07

Table 2

## Main Effects of Previous Record

	First Offense	Third Offense	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>	(df)
Severity of Offense	4.43	4.60	1.18	ns	(1,85)
Punishment	4.20	4.15	.09	ns	(1,85)
Do it Again	3.51	3.93	4.57	.035	(1,85)
Grievant Dangerous	3.63	4.00	2.40	ns	(1,85)
Responsibility of Company	1.55	2.05	6.19	.015	(1,84)
Responsibility of Grievant	4.75	4.32	9.53	.003	(1,84)
Sorry for the Grievant	2.83	2.72	.27	ns	(1,84)

Table 3

## Main Effects of Impression Management Tactic

	Account	Apology	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>	(df)
Severity of Offense	4.66	4.36	3.84	.053	(1,85)
Punishment	4.18	4.18	.01	ns	(1,85)
Do it Again	4.14	3.27	20.98	.001	(1,85)
Grievant Dangerous	4.09	3.51	6.16	.015	(1,85)
Responsibility of Company	1.81	1.73	.17	ns	(1,84)
Responsibility of Grievant	4.43	4.68	3.32	ns	(1,84)
Sorry for the Grievant	2.84	2.73	.30	ns	(1,84)



Table 4

## Interaction Effects

	Account		Apology		<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>	(df)
	First Offense	Third Offense	First Offense	Third Offense			
Severity of Offense	4.67	4.65	4.20	4.55	1.40	ns	(1,85)
Punishment	4.46a	3.85b	3.96a,b	4.45a	8.76	.004	(1,85)
Do it Again	4.17b	4.10b	2.88a	3.75b	6.08	.016	(1,85)
Grievant Dangerous	4.17b	4.00b	3.12a	4.00b	5.03	.028	(1,85)
Responsibility of Company	1.63	2.05	1.48	2.05	.13	ns	(1,84)
Responsibility of Grievant	4.75b	4.05a	4.75b	4.60b	3.99	.049	(1,84)
Sorry for the Grievant	2.67a,b	3.05a	3.00a,b	2.40b	5.60	.020	(1,84)