



# Interactive influence of work–life balance benefits, employee recommendation, and job attributes on employer attractiveness and job pursuit intentions: two experiments

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## Abstract

Drawing on signaling theory (Spence 1978), we propose that communicating work–life balance benefits offered along with favorable employee recommendations and valued job attributes could be construed as signals organizations deliberately use to influence potential applicants' perceptions of employer attractiveness and enhance job pursuit intentions. We test these ideas in two experiments. In study 1, using carefully constructed vignettes to manipulate work–life balance (WLB) benefits, employee recommendation, and job attributes in a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subjects design and with data gathered from 320 Indian MBA students, we found support for the direct and interactive effects of these variables on employer attractiveness. In study 2, using a  $3 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subjects design and data from 360 Indian MBA students, we examined the influence of three different alternative work arrangements, a form of WLB benefit, and how such benefits interact with employee recommendations and job attributes to influence job pursuit intentions. We discuss implications for theory, research, and practice.

**Keywords** Employer attractiveness · Job pursuit intentions · Work–life balance · Employee recommendation · Job attributes · Alternative work arrangement

## Introduction

Given the fierce competition for talent, employer attractiveness is becoming increasingly important to recruit quality applicants (Firfiray & Mayo, 2017; Kumari & Saini, 2018). Employer attractiveness is defined as "the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization" (Berthon et al., 2005,

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p. 156). In turn, employer attractiveness predicts job seekers' job pursuit intentions (Aiman-Smith et al., 2001; Chapman et al., 2005; Resick et al., 2007; Turban et al., 1998). Practitioners and researchers alike are interested in understanding factors that make an organization attractive and enhance the job pursuit intentions of potential applicants.

A review of the recruitment literature reveals several streams of research on employer attractiveness. One dominant stream has focused on the job and organizational attributes, distinguishing between instrumental (e.g., pay) and symbolic (e.g., prestige), that influence employer attractiveness (e.g., Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). This stream of research indicates that both instrumental and symbolic attributes are positively associated with employer attractiveness, and several studies have even studied the relative influence of instrumental versus symbolic attributes on employer attractiveness and/or job pursuit intention (e.g., Ahamad, 2019; Kumari & Saini, 2018; Lievens & Slaughter, 2017; Van Hoye, 2013).

Another stream of research has examined the influence of work–life balance benefits (WLB benefits) on employer attractiveness (Firfiray & Mayo, 2017). However, it is essential to point out that most of this research has been conducted with employees rather than with job seekers. Offering work–life balance benefits is expected to make an employer more attractive to prospective applicants (Firfiray & Mayo, 2017). Many of these studies only explored the impact of one or two work–life balance benefits on employer attractiveness. For example, Casper and Buffardi (2004) examined the effects of only two work–life benefits on applicants' job pursuit intentions, and they did not examine employer attractiveness. Similarly, Wayne and Casper (2012) examined the impact of work–life balance benefits and instrumental job attributes on a firm's reputation, but neglected to include a crucial job attribute, pay and compensation, or symbolic job attributes. In a recent study, Firfiray and Mayo (2017) examined the impact of five work–life benefits along with health care benefits on employer attractiveness focusing solely on instrumental benefits. Their study would have been more enlightening if they had also included symbolic benefits. Thus, this stream of research could be further enhanced by studying both instrumental and symbolic benefits in a single study.

Third, an emerging trend with potential to impact employer attractiveness and job pursuit intentions is recommendation of an employer as the employer of choice by employees (Saini & Jawahar, 2019). Employees voluntarily record their reviews and recommendation of an employer on crowdsourced-based platforms, such as Glassdoor. Because employees base these recommendations on their work experiences and treatment within organizations, employee recommendations are viewed to credibly reflect employer attractiveness. Organizations are aware of such recommendations, and when such recommendations are favorable, relay it to potential applicants to signal organizational attractiveness. Job seekers try to gather information about an organization from the various organization dependent (e.g., organization's website) as well as independent sources (e.g., word-of-mouth recommendations). Since independent sources, such as word-of-mouth, are perceived as more credible, information from that source is more likely to be accepted (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2007a, 2007b). In addition, employee word-of-mouth recommendation is also more diagnostic due to high information quality which only an insider (employee) can provide.



Thus, when employees recommend an organization, job seekers will be more attracted to that organization. However, the influence of such reviews on job seekers' perceptions of employer attractiveness has not been investigated yet.

From a review of the recruitment literature, it is evident that job attributes and work–life balance benefits influence recruitment outcomes and that employer recommendation as an antecedent shows promise. It then behooves us to study the impact of these variables in a single study to examine their relative influence and examine how these variables interact to influence outcomes. In addition, we overcome the limitations of previous studies. For instance, with a few exceptions (Kumari & Saini, 2018; Van Hoyer & Saks, 2011), studies have not rigorously investigated the relative importance of instrumental versus symbolic attributes in shaping employer attractiveness. Second, studies on work–life balance benefits focused on the effect of a few specific work–life balance benefits (e.g., Firfiray & Mayo, 2017) or used samples for whom some benefits may have no relevance (e.g., Casper & Buffardi, 2004) or neglected to include crucial job attributes, such as pay and compensation (e.g., Wayne & Casper, 2012) or focused on instrumental but not symbolic benefits (e.g., Firfiray & Mayo, 2017).

Third, there is virtually no research on the influence of employee recommendation of an employer as an employer of choice (Saini & Jawahar, 2019, 2021) on employer attractiveness to potential job applicants. Fourth, these variables don't operate in isolation but are likely to interactively influence employer attractiveness. Employers need to know what factors influence employer attractiveness, the relative importance of these factors and how these factors might combine to influence attractiveness. Knowing trade-offs among factors can help organizations make informed investment decisions in one or more of these antecedents of employer attractiveness. In addition to these gaps, the manuscript also addresses country specific (i.e., India) issues related to talent attraction. For instance, relative to advanced countries, in developing countries, including India, benefits such as work–life balance and alternative work arrangements have never been valued by young (Indian) jobseekers. The pandemic forced many employees to work remotely, and employees began to appreciate alternative work arrangements. However, it is yet unknown how these changed expectations affect employer attractiveness? Our study addresses these gaps in the literature and has the potential to offer practical insights.

We posit that organizations use the availability of attributes and work–life balance benefits, and employee recommendations as signals (Spence, 1973) to enhance job seekers' perceptions of employer attractiveness. In study 1, we test these ideas using carefully constructed vignettes to manipulate work–life balance benefits, employee recommendations, and job attributes in a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subjects design and with data gathered from 320 Indian MBA students. Previous research has shown that employer attractiveness leads to job pursuit intentions. Since intentions are the most proximal antecedents of behavior, we conducted study 2 to predict job pursuit intentions using a  $3 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subject design that manipulated three types of alternative work arrangements along with employee recommendations and job attributes.

Our studies make several contributions to the literature on employer attractiveness and job pursuit intentions. First, our studies add to the stream of research that examined the relative influence of instrumental versus symbolic



attributes on employer attractiveness (study 1) and job pursuit intentions (study 2). Second, instead of focusing on specific work–life balance benefits as previous studies have done (e.g., Casper & Buffardi, 2004), in study 1, we manipulated work–life balance benefits such that more or fewer benefits are offered. This is an important advancement because the presence of specific benefits does not mean job applicants may perceive high levels of WLB benefits because the specific benefit may not be applicable or relevant to the applicant (e.g., childcare benefits may not be relevant to a single male or an empty nester). In study 2, we examined three different types of alternative work arrangements that enhance WLB benefits. Third, our studies are among the first to examine if employee recommendations signal employer attractiveness and job pursuit intentions. Fourth, we studied two-way and three-way interactions to make this study realistic because, in naturally occurring environments, these antecedents are likely to interact with each other in influencing employer attractiveness and job pursuit intentions. Finally, by ensuring scenario realism and collecting data from MBA students who were in the midst of the campus placement process (actively interviewing for jobs), we further ensured the ecological validity of our studies.

### **Study 1: employer attractiveness**

We posit that organizations deliberately use signals to convey to potential employees that they are a good place to work (Slaughter et al., 2014). In fact, signaling theory has been widely used to study recruitment outcomes (e.g., Banerjee et al., 2018). Briefly, signaling theory (Spence, 1973) focuses on the deliberate communication of positive information (sending a signal) regarding an entity, say an organization, by a sender (signaler) to a receiver. The effectiveness of the signal depends on source credibility and interpretation of the signal by the receiver. To facilitate more efficient signaling, receivers can send feedback in the form of countersignals. Receivers desire information about signalers, but signalers also desire information about receivers so that they may know which signals are most reliable, to which signals receivers are paying the most attention, and how receivers are interpreting signals. In the same way that receiver attention can improve the signaling process, signaler attention to countersignals can also result in more efficient signaling, particularly in an iterative or sequential bargaining context (Srivastava, 2001).

Given this description of signaling theory, it is easy to see the crucial role of signaling theory in influencing recruitment outcomes. Offering inducements, such as work–life balance benefits and valued instrumental attributes, such as high pay and compensation, and symbolic attributes, such as organization's reputation enhance organization's attractiveness to potential job applicants. Similarly, employee recommendation that the organization is a good place to work also signals employer attractiveness to potential applicants. Next, we discuss how each of these factors acts as a signal to influence organizational attractiveness.



## Work–life balance benefits and employer attractiveness

Organizations use WLB benefits to signal that they are a good place to work. Many organizations offer inducements, such as on-site child care (Carless & Wintle, 2007) and work–life balance practices, such as flextime (Clark, 2000) to attract applicants. However, only a handful of studies have focused on the impact of work–life balance practices on recruitment outcomes (e.g., Firfiray & Mayo, 2017; Rau & Hyland, 2002). For instance, a study by Rau and Hyland (2002) revealed that individuals are attracted differently to different work–life balance benefits. As an example, an individual having high work–family conflict was attracted to the employer providing flextime and those having low work–family conflict preferred telecommuting (Rau & Hyland, 2002).

Therefore, to attract talent, it is necessary to position the organization as the best place to work (Sainiet al., 2014), which largely depends on the job and non-job attributes being offered by the employer (Casper & Buffardi, 2004). WLB benefits signal to potential job seekers employers' commitment toward employees and their family's care (Carless & Wintle, 2007), which enhances the attraction as an employer. Thus, it is not surprising that work–life initiatives are a key component of many "best employer" surveys (Love & Singh, 2011; Saini et al., 2014). Work–life balance benefits can be communicated to prospective job seekers through early recruitment activities. Communicating such benefits to job seekers through the different platforms, such as company website, company social media page, online and offline job advertisements, employee testimonials signals to job seekers that the organization is a good place to work and influences their decision to apply for the job (Ahamad, 2019). In this way, offering WLB benefits enhances an organization's image and thereby increases attractiveness (Rau & Hyland, 2002; Turban, 2001).

**Hypothesis 1A** Work–life balance benefits will positively influence employer attractiveness.

## Employee recommendation and employer attractiveness

Job seekers' positive perception of the employer enhances employer attractiveness (Cable & Turban, 2003). A job seeker tries to gather job information from the various organization dependent as well as independent sources. Information gathered through independent sources is viewed as more credible and thus more likely to be trusted (Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2007a). Recommendation from employees that an organization is a good place to work has high diagnostic value because it is informed by rich lived experience of employees. According to the accessibility-diagnostic model, such information is perceived as more authentic, credible and influences jobseekers' decisions to a considerable extent (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Employee recommendation describing salient features of



employment experience provides valuable information to the job seeker. Consequently, job seekers will be greatly influenced by employees' recommendations that the organization is a good place to work (Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2007a, 2007b) and find the organization attractive.

**Hypothesis 1B** Recommendation from employees will positively influence employer attractiveness.

### Job attributes and employer attractiveness

An organization's image is influenced by instrumental and symbolic factors (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). Instrumental factors are objective and realistic job attributes such as pay and compensation, career growth opportunity, and so on (Cable & Judge, 1994; Van Hoyer et al., 2013). Instrumental attributes trigger interest and attraction in the prospective job seekers because of their utility (Van Hoyer et al., 2013). In contrast, symbolic attributes are subjective benefits associated with the job and organization, such as organizational pride, image, and status. These influence an employer's image as innovative, ethical, and sincere (Lievens, 2007; Van Hoyer et al., 2013).

Previous research investigating instrumental attributes has reported compensation (Berthon et al., 2005; Peluso et al., 2017; Rampl, 2014; Thomas & Wise, 1999; Wayne & Casper, 2012), career growth opportunity (Bretz & Judge, 1994; Kumari & Saini, 2018; Thomas & Wise, 1999; Turban, 2001; Turban & Keon, 1993), and job security (Turban, 2001) to be positively related to employer attractiveness. Similarly, investigations of symbolic attributes, such as corporate social responsibility (Backhaus et al., 2002; Luce et al., 2001; Turban & Greening, 1997) and organization culture (Boswell et al., 2003) corporate image (Berthon et al., 2005; Brown et al., 2006; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Lemmink et al., 2003; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Tsai & Yang, 2010), employer brand image (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Collins & Stevens, 2002; Turban & Cable, 2003), and workplace authenticity have reported positive associations with employer attractiveness.

With a few exceptions (Kumari & Saini, 2018; Van Hoyer & Saks, 2012), previous research has not rigorously examined the relative influence of symbolic versus instrumental attributes on employer attractiveness. An organization's symbolic attributes signal its intangible characteristics and stimulate job seekers' attraction, if, and when, there is convergence between job seeker's preferences and the organization's symbolic attributes (Lievens, 2007; Van Hoyer et al., 2013). Generally, applicants find symbolic attributes, such as prestige and reputation, attractive and are attracted to employers with favorable symbolic attributes. Some research suggests that instrumental attributes (e.g., pay) satisfy basic needs, whereas symbolic attributes appeal to and fulfill higher-order needs (Ahamad, 2019). Therefore, we posit that symbolic attributes as more potent signals than instrumental attributes in influencing employer attractiveness and propose the following hypothesis.



**Hypothesis 1C** Job attributes will positively influence employer attractiveness such that symbolic attributes will have more influence on employer attractiveness than instrumental attributes.

### **Interactive influence of work–life balance, employee recommendations, and job attributes**

As proposed earlier, the presence of work–life balance benefits will positively influence employer attractiveness because such benefits signal that the employer cares about the well-being of its employees. This relationship will be further strengthened when employees endorse the organization as a good place to work. Therefore, we expect work–life balance and employee recommendation to interactively influence employer attractiveness.

**Hypothesis 2A** Work–life balance and employee recommendation will interact to influence employer attractiveness, such that employer attractiveness will be higher when more work–life balance benefits are offered and employees recommend the organization than when fewer work–life balance benefits are offered and when employee recommendation is absent.

Only recently have work–life balance benefits been studied in combination with job attributes. For instance, in one study, Firfiray and Mayo (2017) found that when standard pay and compensation are supplemented by work–life balance benefits (rather than health care benefits), it attracted a higher number of jobseekers. However, they considered work–life balance provision as secondary to pay and compensation (instrumental benefits). Nevertheless, they reported that work–life balance is more influential than job attributes in attracting job seekers. It gives a more positive signal about the organization's care and commitment to its employees. Thus, it is important to study how work–life balance benefits combine with instrumental and symbolic attributes to influence employer attractiveness. The presence of high WLB benefits would signal that the organization takes care of its employees and is committed to their well-being. Symbolic attributes convey the prestige associated with working for the organization. We posit that the positive relationship between WLB benefits and organizational attractiveness will be enhanced in the presence of symbolic attributes. Consistent with previous research and theoretical assertions that symbolic attributes are likely to be more influential than instrumental attributes (Van Hove et al., 2013), we offer the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 2B** Work–life balance and job attributes will interact to influence employer attractiveness such that employer attractiveness will be higher for high WLB and symbolic job attributes than for low WLB and instrumental job attributes.

Job seekers are likely to be significantly influenced by employees' recommendations that the organization is a good place to work (Saini & Jawahar, 2019). When



the organization is also perceived as providing high levels of instrumental attributes (e.g., pay and compensation) and has a good organizational image, job seekers will be really attracted to the organization. This will be particularly true when symbolic attributes are present relative to instrumental attributes (Van Hoye et al., 2013). Symbolic attributes signal the attractiveness of working for an employer, and this effect will be bolstered when a high percentage of employees recommend the employer as a good place to work. Therefore, we offer the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 2C** Employee recommendation and job attributes will interact to influence employer attractiveness such that employer attractiveness will be higher when employees recommend the organization and symbolic attributes are present than when employee recommendation is absent and instrumental attributes are present.

It is likely that work–life balance benefits, employee recommendations and job attributes interact to influence employer attractiveness. While the exact nature of the interaction is difficult to specify a priori because of lack of previous research examining these variables, it is reasonable to expect a three-way interaction. Given that in naturally occurring environments, these variables are likely to bolster the effects of each other, studying three-way interaction enhances the ecological validity of the study. Therefore, we offer the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 3** Work–life balance benefits, employee recommendation, and job attributes will interact to influence employer attractiveness.

## Method

### Participants

Final year students of Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs who were about to enter the job market were recruited as subjects for the experiment. MBA students have been widely used in earlier studies on employer attractiveness (e.g., Baum & Kabst, 2014; Firfiray & Mayo, 2017), as they represent a mix of new and experienced job seekers. These MBA students were from premier Indian universities and colleges accredited by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council as 'A' ranked institutes, one of the highest educational accreditations in India.

First, we used the software G\*-power version 3.1.9.2 to calculate the needed sample size. For a total of eight experimental conditions, having four degrees of freedom, i.e., four interaction effects and an effect size of 0.25, a total sample size of 252 is required to get a power of 0.9 and critical  $F=2.41$ . Thus, we aimed to collect a sample of more than 252. A total of 531 students were requested to participate in the study, of which 329 students participated in the study. To ensure equal cell sizes, we randomly selected 320 out of the 329 responses to analyze. Of the 320 subjects,





65% were men, and the average age was 27.48 years. Further, 67.5% of the subjects were single, and 33.7% had prior work experience.

### **Study design and procedure**

We employed a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subjects experimental design, with three independent variables, each at two levels: work–life balance (high vs. low), job attributes (instrumental vs. symbolic), and employee recommendation (present vs. absent). The effect of these three independent variables was assessed on employer attractiveness. Factorial designs, such as ours, enable us to simultaneously examine the effect of two or more independent variables and the interaction effects among those variables (Zikmund et al., 2013).

Data were collected from students at five different institutions. At these institutions, campus placement process had begun. At each institution, students were requested to attend a lecture on the job search process by one of the authors, with prior permission from the respective head of the institution. At the end of this session, students were requested to participate in the study. Students who agreed to participate in the experiment were given a short introduction about the study. Then, students were randomly assigned to one of eight experimental conditions. At the conclusion of the study, subjects were thanked and debriefed.

Scenarios were carefully constructed to manipulate the independent variables and care was taken to ensure they were realistic. We followed guidelines offered by Mietzner and Reger (2005) and Harris et al. (2006) to develop scenarios. Subjects were asked to read the scenario and then respond to a five-item scale measuring employer attractiveness developed by Highhouse et al. (2003). A sample item is, "This company is attractive to me as a place for employment". Participants used a 7-point scale with anchors 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree to respond to the items. Cronbach's alpha for the employer attractiveness scale was 0.89. Additionally, we controlled for participants' gender, age, marital status, work experience, and prime wage earner status (i.e., self vs. parent) as these are the primary control variables used in previous studies (Hill et al., 2001). While age was measured as a continuous variable, other control variables were measured on a dichotomous scale.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental conditions. A fictitious company's name was used to avoid any unintended effect of (known) organization's reputation (Turban & Cable, 2003) and reduce any bias against a particular organization (Harris et al., 2006). To increase task salience, only subjects who were actively looking for jobs served as participants. Details about the organization, job position and job location were kept constant across scenarios (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2007a, 2007b), and the scenarios were pretested in a pilot study.

### **Pilot test**

We conducted a pilot study to assess "scenario realism" and verify the efficacy of manipulations of independent variables. Forty subjects participated in the pilot study. After reading the vignettes, they responded to items measuring employer



attractiveness. Means and standard deviations are reported in Table 1. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed a significant difference in the effect of independent variables on employer attractiveness,  $F(7,32)=193.16, p<0.001$ . Descriptive statistics revealed that mean values of each group were significantly different for employer attractiveness (Table 1). Furthermore, to reduce demand characteristics, experimental disguise was used, i.e., subjects were not told about the hypotheses. They were isolated from each other and not allowed to talk to each other about the experimental procedure. In addition, each adjacent participant was given a different scenario and only one treatment level was given to a particular subject to avoid guessing of hypotheses (Zikmund et al., 2013).

## Manipulations and manipulation checks

Manipulation checks were administered to ascertain whether the scenarios were perceived as intended. Work–life balance was manipulated as high or low, job attribute was manipulated as instrumental or symbolic, and employee recommendation was manipulated as present or absent. The manipulations and the description of these levels were based on previous literature and the publicly available real description and information on organization websites.

Work–life balance was operationalized and manipulated at two different levels, i.e., high and low work–life balance. Clark's (2000, p. 751) definition of work–life balance as 'satisfaction and good functioning at work and home with a minimum of role conflict' (Clark, 2000, p. 751) was used in the operationalization and development of the scenarios. The presence of high work–life balance was manipulated as *"the organization provides many family-friendly policies such as flex work hours, job sharing, wellness packages and programs such as employee assistance programs, on-site childcare, and parental leave, among others. These benefits lead to high work–life balance among employees."* Low work–life balance was presented as *"the organization provides only a few family-friendly policies. It does not provide work–life balance policies, such as flex work hours, job sharing, wellness packages and programs such as employee assistance programs, on-site childcare, and parental leave. Because only a few benefits are provided, employees have low work–life balance"*. Manipulation

**Table 1** Study 1: scenario wise mean and standard deviation of pilot test for employer attractiveness

Work–life balance	Employer attractiveness							
	Employee recommendation—present				Employee recommendation—absent			
	Symbolic		Instrumental		Symbolic		Instrumental	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
High	6.56	0.33	5.88	0.33	5.12	0.30	4.48	0.18
Low	4.28	0.27	3.20	0.32	2.32	0.27	1.56	0.17



check consisted of the statement "the employees working in the organizations have high (or low, as applicable) work–life balance", on a seven-point scale (1—strongly disagree, 7—strongly agree).

Job attributes were operationalized at two levels, viz. instrumental and symbolic, which were described as per the definition of Van Hoya et al. (2013). The instrumental benefit was presented as "*the employees' pay and compensation are higher than the market standard, and the employer offers good career growth opportunities and other financial benefits*". The symbolic benefit was presented as "*the organization is very reputed, and employees feel a sense of pride in working here and enjoy excellent societal status.*" The statement "the organization provides good instrumental (or symbolic, as applicable) job attributes" on a seven-point scale (1—strongly disagree, 7—strongly agree) was used to ascertain the effectiveness of job attributes manipulation.

Employee recommendation has not been studied widely; therefore, there is a lack of consensus on an acceptable definition. The presence of employee recommendations was manipulated as a "*very high percent of the employees of this company strongly endorse the organization as a good place to work.*" In contrast, the absence of employee recommendations was manipulated as "*no information could be found about the percentage of employees of this company endorsing the organization as a good place to work.*" Subjects were asked to respond to the statement "Employee recommendation information on this organization is available (or not available, as applicable)" on a seven-point scale (1—strongly disagree, 7—strongly agree).

Independent samples T-test was performed to analyze the difference in the manipulation of each variable. A significant difference between high work–life balance ( $M=6.6$ ,  $SD=0.55$ ) and low work–life balance ( $M=1.5$ ,  $SD=0.54$ ),  $t(8)=15.01$ ,  $p<0.001$  was found, confirming that the manipulation was successful. Similarly, there was significant difference between instrumental ( $M=6.8$ ,  $SD=0.45$ ) and symbolic job attributes ( $M=1.2$ ,  $SD=0.44$ ),  $t(8)=19.79$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; and between presence ( $M=6.7$ ,  $SD=0.47$ ) and absence of recommendation ( $M=1.3$ ,  $SD=0.44$ ),  $t(8)=19.6.$ ,  $p<0.001$ , verifying the effectiveness of manipulations. Subjects reported employer attractiveness after reviewing these vignettes that manipulated perceptions of WLB benefits, attributes, and employee recommendations.

## Results

Means and standard deviations of employer attractiveness for each condition are reported in Table 2. We used analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for hypothesis testing (Table 3). The ANCOVA tests have many benefits, such as high power, effect detection accuracy, better estimation of interaction effects, and robust handling of measurement errors present in covariates (Little et al., 2000). Consistent with the recommendations of Bernerth and Aguinis (2016), we have reported results with and without controls.



**Table 2** Study 1: descriptive statistics of main study

Work–life balance	Employer attractiveness							
	Employee recommendation—present				Employee recommendation—absent			
	Symbolic		Instrumental		Symbolic		Instrumental	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
High	6.39	0.30	5.85	0.40	4.97	0.35	4.51	0.37
Low	3.71	0.49	2.96	0.36	2.31	0.27	1.97	0.42

*WLB* work–life balance, *JA* job attribute, *ER* employee recommendation

**Table 3** Study 1: tests of between-subjects effects (dependent variable: employer attractiveness)

Source	Sum of squares	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	Sig	Partial Eta squared
Corrected model	741.35	12	511.58	.000	.952
Intercept	29.36	1	243.11	.000	.442
Control variables					
Age	.14	1	1.16	.283	.004
PE	.03	1	.22	.638	.001
MS	2.13	1	17.60	.000	.054
GN	.13	1	1.04	.308	.003
WX	1.72	1	14.23	.000	.044
Main effect					
WLB	446.62	1	3698.42	.000	.923
JA	17.88	1	148.03	.000	.325
ER	104.85	1	868.27	.000	.739
Interaction effect					
WLB×JA	.37	1	3.05	.082	.010
WLB×ER	.06	1	.51	.478	.002
JA×ER	1.43	1	11.82	.001	.037
WLB×JA×ER	1.42	1	11.78	.001	.037
Error	37.07	307			
Total	6121.60	320			
Corrected total	778.42	319			

*PE* prime earner, *MS* marital status, *GN* gender, *WX* work experience, *WLB* work–life balance, *JA* job attribute, *ER* employee recommendation, *EA* employer attractiveness

## Main effects

Work–life balance benefits significantly affected employer attractiveness,  $F(1, 307) = 3698.44$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.923$ , supporting Hypothesis 1A. As expected,



employer attractiveness was higher in the high work–life balance condition ( $M=5.43$ ,  $SD=0.81$ ) than in the low work–life balance condition ( $M=2.74$ ,  $SD=0.77$ ). The means and standard deviations of all conditions are presented in Table 3. Employee recommendation has a significant main effect on employer attractiveness,  $F(1, 307)=868.27$ ,  $p=0.000$ ,  $\eta^2=0.739$ , supporting Hypothesis 1B. Employer attractiveness is higher when employee recommendation is present ( $M=4.72$ ,  $SD=1.48$ ) than absent ( $M=3.45$ ,  $SD=1.36$ ).

The type of job attribute has a significant effect on employer attractiveness,  $F(1, 307)=148.03$ ,  $p=0.000$ ,  $\eta^2=0.325$ , supporting Hypothesis 1C. Employer attractiveness is higher for symbolic attributes ( $M=4.34$ ,  $SD=1.55$ ) than for instrumental attributes ( $M=3.83$ ,  $SD=1.52$ ). It may be noted that work–life balance has the highest effect size ( $\eta^2=0.923$ ) followed by employee recommendation ( $\eta^2=0.739$ ) and job attributes ( $\eta^2=0.325$ ).

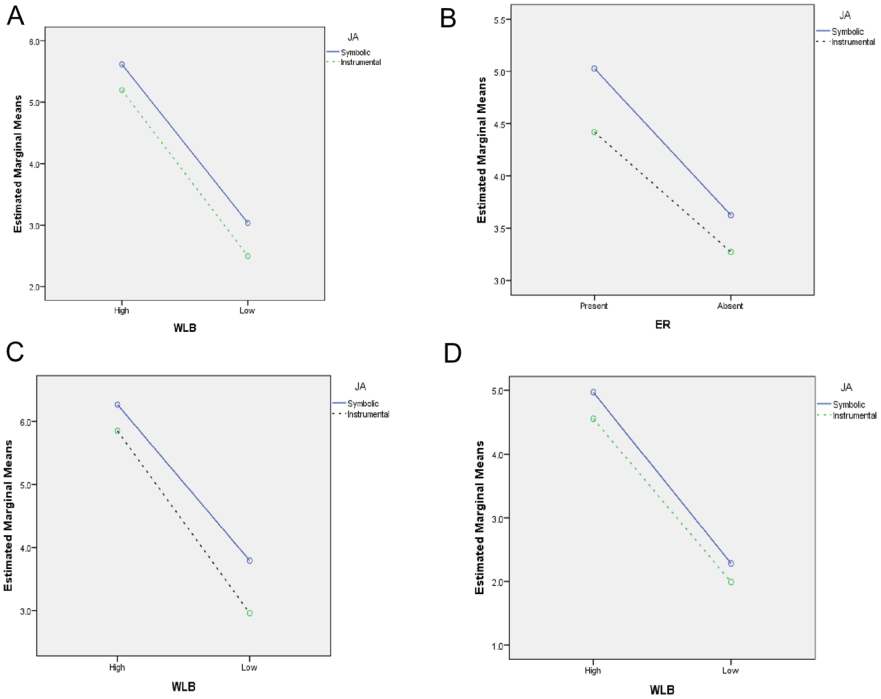
### Two-way interaction effects

The two-way interaction between work–life balance and employee recommendation was not significant for employer attractiveness ( $p=0.478$ ), failing to support Hypothesis 2A. Two-way interaction effect between work–life balance and job attributes was significant for employer attractiveness,  $F(1, 307)=3.05$ ;  $p<0.10$ ,  $\eta^2=0.010$ , supporting Hypothesis 2B (also see Fig. 1A). It is important to note that the type of job attribute does not make any difference when work–life balance is high. Employer attractiveness was higher in the high work–life balance and symbolic job attributes condition ( $M=5.68$ ,  $SD=0.78$ ) than in the low work–life balance and instrumental benefits condition ( $M=2.47$ ,  $SD=0.63$ ). In fact, high work–life benefits and symbolic benefits are better signals than high work–life balance benefits and instrumental benefits ( $M=5.18$ ,  $SD=0.77$ ) and low work–life balance benefits and symbolic benefits ( $M=3.01$ ,  $SD=0.80$ ) in signaling employer attractiveness. Two-way interaction effect between job attributes and employee recommendation was significant for employer attractiveness,  $F(1, 307)=11.82$ ,  $p=0.001$ ,  $\eta^2=0.037$ , supporting Hypothesis 2C (see also Fig. 1B). Employer attractiveness was higher in the symbolic job attributes and employee recommendation condition ( $M=5.05$ ,  $SD=1.40$ ) than in the instrumental benefits and employee recommendation absent condition ( $M=3.26$ ,  $SD=1.33$ ) (see Table 3 for mean values).

### Three-way interaction effects

The three-way interaction of work–life balance, job attributes and employee recommendation was significant for employer attractiveness,  $F(1, 307)=11.78$ ,  $p=0.001$ ,  $\eta^2=0.037$ , supporting Hypothesis 3 (see Fig. 1C and D).





**Fig. 1** Study 1: **A** 2-way interaction effect of WLB and JA on EA. **B** 2-way interaction effect of ER and JA on EA. **C** 3-way interaction effect of WLB and JA on EA (employee recommendation present). **D** 3-way interaction effect of WLB and JA on EA (employee recommendation absent)

## Discussion

Results of study 1 indicated support for the main effects, the two-way interactions between WLB benefits and job attributes and between job attributes and employee recommendation, and for the three-way interaction. These results indicate that WLB benefits, attributes, and employee recommendations separately as well as jointly influence employer attractiveness. Of the three variables, WLB benefits had the most effect on employer attractiveness which is consistent with previous research. For instance, Firfiray and Mayo (2017) reported that work–life balance benefits increase perceptions of person–organization fit, thereby influencing recruitment outcomes. To be sure, work–life balance benefits are an essential component of HRM policies and practices, and the results of our study suggest that employers are best served by signaling the availability of work–life balance benefits to prospective applicants.

Even though most participants were single, their employer attractiveness ratings were most influenced by work–life balance benefits. India, like many other countries, was severely affected by the COVID pandemic forcing people to work from home. Working from home afforded people flexibility and time to care for



other family members as most young Indians live with their parents. These experiences likely prompted participants to value work–life balance benefits significantly more than others. A second reason may be sample specific. For instance, MBA students graduating from premier schools are sought after and highly compensated. Knowing this, participants may be looking for employers who can offer a better work–life balance which empowers them to have a well-balanced life (Carless & Wintle, 2007) rather than just fulfilling career demands. Consequently, we wanted to conduct a follow-up study to investigate aspects of WLB benefits that have the most effect. In addition, having shown that these variables influence employer attractiveness, in study 2, we investigated their impact on job pursuit intentions.

## Study 2: Job Pursuit Intentions

In study 1, we manipulated WLB benefits as low versus high and found that higher levels of benefits lead to more employer attractiveness. In study 2, we examined the influence of three alternative work arrangements (AWA) that, in unique ways, contribute to WLB benefits. Specifically, we investigated the influence of flexible work hours, flexible work location, and flexible career path on job pursuit intentions and how these AWA interact with job attributes and employee recommendations to influence job pursuit intentions.

### Alternative work arrangements

Alternative work arrangements (Johnson et al., 2008; Mas & Pallais, 2017), once considered a privilege, have become a necessity as employers and employees attempt to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Such arrangements include flexible work hours, flexible work location (Tsen et al., 2021a), and even flexible career paths. Alternative work arrangements such as flexible work hours have been found to impact employees' health and retention rates as well (Shifirin & Michel., 2021; Tsen et al., 2021b). These results demonstrate that alternative work arrangements are associated with better physical health, reduced absenteeism, and fewer somatic symptoms, suggesting that alternative work arrangements can facilitate employees in maintaining their health.

Even before the pandemic, the 2016 Deloitte millennial survey found that 67% preferred flexible work hours (Deloitte, 2016) and the 2018 Deloitte survey revealed that after pay and compensation, flexible work hours and work–life balance were the most preferred option of millennials. Similarly, the 2017 Harvard Business Review survey of "most desirable employee benefits" reported flexible work hours as the most preferred choice of 88% of respondents (Kerry, 2017). Flexible work hours afford more control (Lambert et al., 2008), promote effective utilization of scarce time and reduce inter-role conflict, making it an attractive option for job seekers (Rau & Hyland, 2002). The opportunity to choose work hours that fit with one's



lifestyle signals that the employer values employees and cares about their overall well-being, increasing job pursuit intentions of job seekers.

Technological advancements have made it easier for employees to work remotely, and younger job seekers are attracted to employers known for providing flexible work location options, including telecommuting (Hill et al., 2001; Rau & Hyland, 2002). Flexible work location promotes work–life balance (Sullivan & Smithson, 2007), and this flexibility enhances the job pursuit intentions of job seekers (Shamir & Salomon, 1985; Troup & Rose, 2012).

Different from the traditional career path and dual career path (Carless & Wintle, 2007), Hall (1990) introduced the concept of flexible career path as applicable to both men and women, allowing employees the freedom of career exit, career re-entry, and career maintenance, and Honeycutt and Rosen (1997) reported flexible career path enhances employer attractiveness to a great extent. Since employer attractiveness is the best predictor of job pursuit intentions, we expect flexible career path will also be related to job pursuit intentions.

Informed by this literature review and results of study 1, in study 2, we manipulated alternative work arrangement benefits at three levels, flexible work hours, flexible work location, and flexible career path, to see which of these have the most effect on job pursuit intentions. Pursuing an MBA degree from an A ranked premier Indian university is very expensive, so typically, students borrow huge sums of money from private banks to finance their education. Thus, these students are motivated to secure a high-paying job after graduation and are driven to climb the corporate ladder, and consequently, for these students, who are likely to be primary bread winners, the flexible career path is unlikely to be an attractive option. Most Indians live in houses that are modest, and a very few people in Indian metro cities have their own houses. Thus, it may not always be possible to work undisturbed when telecommuting, making flexible work location options less practical. On the other hand, most Indians are likely to benefit from flexible work hours as it gives them the opportunity to better balance work and family responsibilities. For these reasons, we expect flexible work hours benefit to lead to higher job pursuit intentions than either flexible work location or flexible career path WLB options.

**Hypothesis 1** Flexible work hours will have more influence on job pursuit intentions than flexible work location and flexible career path WLB benefit.

### **Alternative work arrangement and employee recommendations**

Employees who believe that the employer is fulfilling the psychological contract are likely to be satisfied, feel committed to the organization, and motivated to promote it. Such employees might write positive reviews of the organization. Knowledge of positive recommendations from employees and the provision of alternative work arrangements are likely to make an organization attractive and increase job seekers' job pursuit intentions more than the absence of employee recommendations.





**Hypothesis 2A** For a given AWA (flexible work location, flexible work hours, or flexible career path), the presence of employee recommendation enhances the job pursuit intentions more than the absence of it.

### **Alternative work arrangements and job attributes**

Job attributes are a crucial part of job offers and are a key factor influencing job pursuit intentions. Research suggests that symbolic job attributes may be more important than instrumental job attributes (Van Hoye & Saks, 2011) because symbolic attributes reflect and align with job seekers' value system. Hence a job seeker who believes in supporting social causes would be attracted to an organization that has high corporate social reputation and supports social causes for the betterment of the society. Therefore, job seekers are likely to consider organizations offering symbolic job attributes along with any AWA, particularly flexible work hours, as an even more attractive option and consider applying to such organizations. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 2B** Symbolic job attributes and flexible work hours will positively influence job pursuit intentions more than the instrumental job attributes and flexible work location or flexible career path.

### **Employee recommendations and job attributes**

Employee recommendations signal to job seekers that the organization is a good place to work, and such a signal would increase job pursuit intentions. This relationship will be further strengthened when employees value symbolic attributes ascribed to the organization relative to when such symbolic attributes are not associated with the organization. Thus, these two characteristics will interactively influence job pursuit intentions more than the absence of employee recommendation combined with the provision of only instrumental job attributes.

**Hypothesis 2C** Employee recommendations and the provision of symbolic job attributes will increase job pursuit intentions relative to the absence of employee recommendations and the provision of instrumental job attributes.

### **Alternative work arrangements, job attributes, and employee recommendations**

Organizations that offer flexible work hours and symbolic job attributes would be perceived as more attractive if recommended by their employee than organizations not recommended by employees. Therefore, it is likely that WLB benefits, job attributes and employee recommendations would interactively influence job pursuit intentions.



**Hypothesis 3** Alternative work arrangements, job attributes and employee recommendations will interact to influence job pursuit intentions.

## Method

### Participants

360 MBA final year students entering the job market and participating in placement interviews served as subjects. These students were from five different top ranked Indian institutes accredited by National Assessment and Accreditation Council as 'A' ranked institutes. 527 students were recruited for the study and complete data were obtained from 360 students. Of the respondents, 210 were male. The average age was 25.83 years. 62.52% were single and 39.4% had some work experience.

#### 6.2 Research design.

We used a  $3 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subjects design to study the impact of alternative work arrangement benefits (flexible work hours, flexible work location, and flexible career path)  $\times$  job attributes (instrumental, symbolic)  $\times$  employee recommendation (present, absent) on job pursuit intentions. Students were randomly assigned to one of the twelve conditions. They carefully read the scenario given to them before indicating their job pursuit intentions. The 5-item scale developed by Highhouse et al. (2003) was used to measure job pursuit intentions. A sample item is "I would make this company as one of my first choice as an employer".

### Manipulation checks

All three independent variables were manipulated. We used the same manipulation used in study 1 to manipulate employee recommendations and job attributes. Manipulation of alternative work arrangement, a work–life balance benefit, new to this study, was done as follows.

Flexible work hours was presented as "*employees are permitted to have flexible work hours as per their needs and responsibilities. Employees can choose their job start and finishing time as well as break time.*" Flexible work location was manipulated and presented as "*employees are allowed to have flexible work location, which includes teleworking, working from home or any distant place, as per their needs and responsibilities.*" Flexible career path was manipulated and presented as "*employees are permitted to have flexible career path. Employees can design and select their career as per their choice and convenience. If the situation or family responsibility demands, then an employee may take-off from work for a time duration and could rejoin the organization without any issues. Hence there is freedom of career exit, career re-entry and career maintenance.*" Manipulations checks were administered to ascertain the efficacy of manipulations.

The manipulation check data were analyzed using one-way ANOVA and independent *t*-test. Results of one-way ANOVA show that the manipulation of WLB



benefits is significant,  $F(2, 12) = 68.40$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , as there is a difference in mean for flexible work hours ( $M = 6.20$ ,  $SD = 0.837$ ), flexible work location ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 0.707$ ), and flexible career path ( $M = 1.40$ ,  $SD = 0.548$ ). The manipulation for job attributes analyzed by independent  $t$ -test showed statistical significance between instrumental ( $M = 6.2$ ,  $SD = 0.837$ ) and symbolic job attributes ( $M = 1.6$ ,  $SD = 0.894$ ),  $t(8) = 8.398$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Similarly, for employee recommendation, there is significant difference between presence ( $M = 5.8$ ,  $SD = 0.840$ ) and absence of recommendation ( $M = 2.2$ ,  $SD = 0.837$ ),  $t(8) = 6.830$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

## Results

### Data analysis and hypothesis testing

Means and standard deviation of job pursuit intentions by condition are reported in Table 4. We used analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to test hypotheses (see Table 5). Results indicate that alternative work arrangements have significant impact on job pursuit intentions,  $F(1, 342) = 3698.42$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.923$ . Flexible work hours ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ) has a higher influence than flexible work location ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ) and flexible career path ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) on job pursuit intentions (Table 5), in support of Hypothesis 1.

The two-way interaction between alternative work arrangement and employee recommendation is significant for job pursuit intentions,  $F(2, 342) = 142.78$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.46$  (see Table 4, Fig. 2A), in support of Hypothesis 2A. Also, from descriptive statistics provided in Table 5, it is evident that for a given AWA (flexible work hours, flexible work location and flexible career path), the mean of job pursuit intentions is higher when employees recommend the organization than when employee recommendation is absent.

As expected, we found a significant two-way interaction between alternative work arrangements and job attributes on job pursuit intentions,  $F(2, 342) = 60.22$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.260$  (Fig. 2B) in support of Hypothesis 2B. This implies that the alternative work arrangements and job attributes significantly interact at different levels with each other and influence jobseekers' intention to pursue the job.

**Table 4** Study 2: descriptive statistics

Alternative work arrangements	Job pursuit intention							
	Employee recommendation—present				Employee recommendation—absent			
	Symbolic		Instrumental		Symbolic		Instrumental	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Flexible work hours	6.57	0.22	5.40	0.26	3.01	0.25	1.95	0.19
Flexible work location	6.31	0.15	5.17	0.39	3.65	0.15	1.33	0.28
Flexible career path	5.63	0.34	3.79	0.29	2.67	0.19	1.98	0.24



**Table 5** Study 2: tests of between-subjects effects (dependent variable: job pursuit intention)

Source	Sum of squares	df	<i>F</i>	Sig	Partial Eta squared
Corrected model	1093.93	12	1396.27	.000	.986
Intercept	35.32	1	766.37	.000	.691
Control variables					
Dpn	.575	1	12.47	.000	0.035
MS	.183	1	3.97	.047	0.11
GN	.199	1	4.33	.038	0.12
WX	2.676	1	58.06	.000	.145
PE	.079	1	1.72	.191	.005
Age	.188	1	4.08	.044	.012
Main effect					
AWA	446.62	1	3698.42	.000	.923
JA	17.88	1	148.03	.000	.325
ER	104.85	1	868.27	.000	.739
Interaction effect					
AWA × JA	5.55	2	60.22	.000	.260
AWA × ER	13.16	2	142.78	.000	.455
JA × ER	.06	1	1.24	.266	.004
AWA × JA × ER	15.09	2	163.74	.000	.489
Error	15.76	342			
Total	6736.08	360			
Corrected total	1109.70	359			

*PE* prime earner, *MS* marital status, *GN* gender, *WX* work experience, *AWA* alternative work arrangements, *JA* job attribute, *ER* employee recommendation, *JPI* job pursuit intention

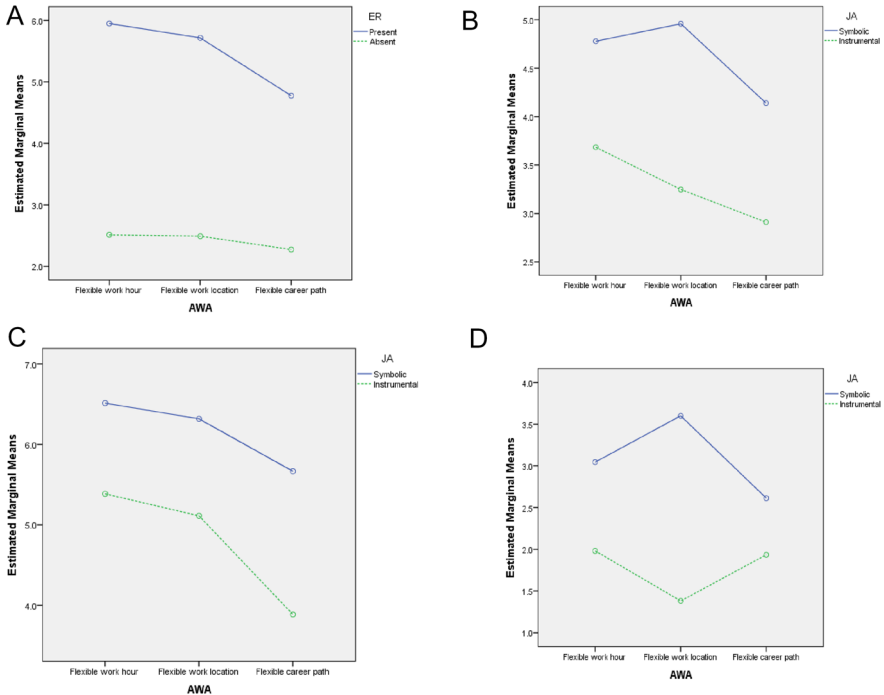
Furthermore, descriptive statistics Table 5 shows that the mean of job pursuit intentions is higher for flexible work hours and symbolic benefits ( $M=4.79$ ,  $SD=1.81$ ) than flexible work hours and instrumental benefits ( $M=3.68$ ,  $SD=1.75$ ).

The two-way interaction effect between employee recommendation and job attributes is not significant, failing to support Hypothesis 2C. The three-way interaction of the independent variables is significant,  $F(2, 342)=163.74$ ,  $p=0.000$ ,  $\eta^2=0.489$ , implying that all three independent variables interact significantly at different levels to influence jobseekers' intention to pursue the job, supporting Hypothesis 3 (Fig. 2C and D).

## Discussion

Attracting talent is essential for the continued sustainability of any organization (Biswas & Suar, 2016; Berthon et al., 2005), so it behooves us to study the effectiveness of recruitment efforts. If recruitment efforts are properly executed,





**Fig. 2** Study 2: **A** 2-way interaction effect of AWA and ER on JPI. **B** 2-way interaction effect of AWA and JA on JPI. **C** 3-way interaction effect of AWA and JA on JPI (employee recommendation present). **D** 3-way interaction effect of AWA and JA on JPI (employee recommendation absent)

potential job applicants are likely to find the organization attractive and have higher job pursuit intentions (Baum & Kabst, 2014). Previous research has reported that both symbolic and instrumental job attributes affect employer attractiveness and job pursuit intentions (Kumari & Saini, 2018), but very few studies have investigated the relative effects of each. Research on the influence of work–life balance benefits on job applicants’ perceptions of employer attractiveness is emerging, but previous studies suffer from some shortcomings. For instance, Casper and Buffardi (2004) studied the impact of work–life benefits, but many of the benefits included were not relevant to participants. Studies investigating WLB benefits and job attributes have made some important omissions. For instance, Firfiray and Mayo (2017) examined the influence of work–life balance benefits along with instrumental benefits but left out symbolic benefits. Employees endorsing their employers as a good place to work is an emerging trend (Dabirian et al., 2017) and how such endorsements affect recruitment outcomes has not been examined.

Given these shortcomings, we conducted two studies. In study 1, we investigated the direct and interactive effects of work–life balance benefits, employee recommendation, and job attributes, both symbolic and instrumental, on employer



attractiveness. In a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  experimental design, we used carefully developed vignettes to manipulate work–life balance benefits (high versus low), employee recommendation (present versus absent), and attributes (instrumental versus symbolic). Using ratings of employer attractiveness supplied by MBA students who were in the midst of job search, we tested study hypotheses. As expected, work–life balance benefits, employee recommendations, and attributes had the main effects on recruitment outcomes. Work–life balance benefits interacted with job attributes, and employee recommendations interacted with job attributes to influence employer attractiveness. In addition, we observed a three-way interaction that significantly influenced employer attractiveness.

Since attractiveness is the best-known antecedent of applying for a job, in study 2, we investigated job pursuit intentions. Given that results of study 1 indicated WLB benefits to have more influence on employer attractiveness than either job attributes or employee recommendations, we wanted to tease out the effect of increasingly popular alternative work arrangements that facilitate work–life balances, such as flexible work hours, flexible work location, and flexible career paths. Results of study 2 indicate that flexible work hours have more influence on job pursuit intentions than either of the other two benefits. Most young Indians live with their parents, siblings, and sometimes grandparents in small living spaces making it difficult to work from home without distractions. In addition, Indians are generally materialistic and having spent substantial funds for education, they tend to be career focused to earn more money. For these reasons, flexible work location and flexible career path are likely less attractive than flexible work hours. Also, working on location allows you to be seen, and enhances opportunities to network, both of which are good for one's career progression. Results also indicate that flexible work hours benefit interacts with job attributes and employee recommendations to enhance job pursuit intentions. Finally, as in study 1, we observed a three-way interaction, suggesting that these three variables interactively influence job pursuit intentions in predictable ways.

## Theoretical implications

Drawing on signaling theory (Spence, 1973), we posited that organizations deliberately use signals to create favorable perceptions and increase interest from potential job seekers. From a signaling theoretical perspective, communicating the presence of work–life balance benefits and favorable employee recommendations along with the provision of valued job attributes can be construed as signals deliberately used to enhance attractiveness. Our results strongly support this core idea of signaling theory as these variables not only directly but also interacted in predictable ways to influence employer attractiveness and job pursuit intentions.

Results for the main effects offer some important insights. In study 1, WLB benefits had the highest effect ( $\eta^2=0.923$ ), followed by employee recommendations ( $\eta^2=0.739$ ) and attributes ( $\eta^2=0.325$ ). This suggests that balancing work and life is an important concern for job seekers, and organizations that offer good WLB benefits should effectively publicize such benefits. Results of study 2 show that flexible



work hours are more important than flexible work location or flexible career path in enhancing job pursuit intentions. The extent to which employees recommend the organization and prestige of the organization appear secondary to this concern for work–life balance.

As we argued earlier, each factor, WLB, employee recommendations, and attributes are signals, as they signal positive characteristics of an employer to potential applicants. Support for the two 2-way interactions (WLB and job attributes, and employee recommendation and job attributes) and the 3-way interaction suggest that signals have the potential to amplify the effect of other signals, an idea that merits future research attention.

In general, our results show that attributes, work–life balance practices, and employer recommendations signal that the organization is an attractive place to work (enhancing employer attractiveness) and consequently influence applicants' intentions to apply (job pursuit intentions). Our second contribution lies in identifying which signals are superior (in study 1, work–life balance signal had the most effect, and in study 2, flexible work hours had the most effect) relative to other signals. A third contribution is identifying specific combinations that have the most effect and identifying trade-offs between certain combinations. Identifying strong or superior signals and how these signals combine with others (e.g., work–life balance and strong employer recommendation) is of theoretical significance as well as of practical value.

## Practical implications

From a practical standpoint, these results underscore the value of widely communicating the benefits offered by the organization. Clearly communicating benefits of working for the organization will create favorable perceptions among potential applicants, increasing organization's attractiveness and job pursuit intentions (Kumari & Saini, 2018). To be sure, there are many variables that potentially impact recruitment outcomes. While prior studies focused on one or two variables, by including more variables, our study mirrors naturally occurring recruitment contexts, thus enhancing the ecological validity of study results.

In addition to main and interactive effects, a review of the means reported in Tables 3 and 5 provides for a nuanced understanding of the combination of factors influencing recruitment outcomes. For instance, providing high pay and compensation adds to labor costs, reducing competitive advantage. Our results show that even in the absence of competitive job attributes (i.e., instrumental and symbolic), organizations may be able to influence applicants' perceptions of organizational attractiveness and job pursuit intentions by leveraging work–life balance benefits and employee recommendation of the organization. One strategy to fully reap the benefits of offering WLB benefits is to communicate the dollar value of such benefits, so employees don't take them for granted. While employee recommendations come at no direct cost to employers, creating a good environment to generate positive recommendations does require resources. Knowing the direct and interactive effects of WLB benefits, attributes, and employee recommendations on employer



attractiveness and job pursuit intentions has practical utility as it can guide organizations to make strategic choices in terms of investment in WLB benefits and job attributes to emphasize and garner positive employee recommendations.

### Potential limitations and future research directions

In spite of the contributions noted above, results should be interpreted in the context of potential limitations. First, our sample consisted of MBA students about to enter the job market, and most were single, thus having fewer family responsibilities. Even so, work–life balance benefits influenced their perceptions and intentions. It is likely that more experienced and older job applicants with more family responsibilities may be even more influenced by work–life balance benefits, a possibility that should be examined by future research. In addition, we manipulated work–life balance benefits as high versus low, as this is more realistic than presence versus absence of benefits. Second, this study was conducted in India, a collectivistic patriarchal society where young people live with extended families. Thus, men, primary breadwinners, share a lower burden of family responsibilities relative to Western societies. Thus, this study should be replicated in individualistic cultures in which men and women share almost equal family responsibilities. Third, the influence of family background may also play a crucial role in influencing the employment decisions of applicants. For example, a jobseeker from a low-income family may prefer higher pay and compensation, whereas a job seeker from an affluent family may prefer social status and higher work–life balance benefits.

### Conclusion

Drawing on signaling theory (Spence, 1973), we posited that communicating work–life balance benefits offered along with favorable employee recommendations and valued job attributes could be construed as signals organizations deliberately use to influence potential applicants' perceptions of organizational attractiveness and increase their job pursuit intentions. Using carefully constructed vignettes to manipulate work–life benefits, employee recommendations, and job attributes and using data collected from MBA students in the midst of job search, we found support for the direct and interactive effects of these variables on employer attractiveness and job pursuit intentions. Of these variables, work–life balance benefits had more influence on employer attractiveness than standard benefits (Firfiray & Mayo, 2017), and flexible work hours impacted job pursuit intentions more than flexible work location and flexible career path. These signals signal what practitioners should do to enhance recruitment effectiveness.

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