Research Summary: Realistic Job Previews

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Purpose

This report synthesizes research on Realistic Job Previews (RJPs), drawing on meta-analyses from the broader workforce as well as studies and guidance specific to human services, particularly child welfare. Its purpose is to provide Child Welfare Agencies with an evidence-based foundation for developing or implementing Realistic Job Previews. The appendix includes a summary of key RJP articles and supplemental research on tailoring recruitment messaging to candidate information processing.

Key Takeaways & Practical Implications for Child Welfare Agencies

1. **RJPs produce a modest but consistent reduction in turnover, especially in complex roles.** Counties experiencing high early attrition should consider RJPs as part of their retention strategies.

2. **RJPs are a low-cost retention strategy.**
   Preventing even one early resignation can offset development and implementation costs. Counties with limited resources may choose to use RJPs as an affordable approach.

3. **There is no single "best" timing for RJP delivery.**
   Research indicates timing should align with the agency's primary workforce challenge and goals.
   - **Pre-hire**: Can reduce early turnover through expectation alignment and early signals of organizational honesty. It may support self-selection but may also reduce applicant volume.
   - **Post-hire**: May be a safer option when the goal is to strengthen organizational honesty, role clarity, and job performance without discouraging applicants.
   - **After the job offer but before acceptance**: May preserve applicant volume throughout recruitment while supporting expectation alignment and perceptions of organizational honesty.
   - **Two-stage approach**: A brief pre-hire RJP followed by a more in-depth post-hire RJP might help counties facing both challenges by reinforcing expectations and signaling organizational honesty at different stages, although this approach has not been tested in the research literature.

4. **RJP format influences outcomes.**
    - **Face-to-face RJPs** have the greatest impact on reducing turnover, possibly because they foster higher engagement.
    - **Written RJPs** have a small effect on reducing turnover and attrition during the recruitment process.
    - **Video-based RJPs** may be less effective for turnover but more effective for improving job performance, and are widely used in child welfare.
    - Pairing video-based or written RJPs with structured engagement opportunities (e.g., facilitated discussion or Q&A) may help replicate the benefits of interactive formats, although this approach has not yet been tested in research.

5. **RJPs improve retention by signaling organizational honesty. Accurate expectation-setting also contributes to effectiveness.**
   RJPs are most effective when they present a balanced, realistic portrayal of both the rewards and challenges of the job. When applicants understand the role's true demands and perceive the organization as transparent, they are more likely to remain in the role.

6. **RJPs should align with organizational values, ethics, and equity goals.**
   Model the empathy and partnership expected of staff and avoid content that may activate implicit bias or reinforce self-fulfilling prophecies in family interactions.

7. **RJPs should be evaluated and refined over time.**
   Evaluation activities, such as gathering feedback, tracking turnover, or piloting, help organizations understand whether the RJP is achieving its intended goals. Research and guidance suggest that RJPs are most effective when they are tested, adjusted, and kept aligned with current job realities.

8. **RJPs are not a standalone solution.**
   They must be paired with broader, evidence-based recruitment, onboarding, and retention strategies. RJPs cannot compensate for systemic or organizational issues (e.g., unmanageable workloads, inadequate compensation, or an unhealthy organizational culture).

I. Background

Child welfare agencies continue to face persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining a skilled and dedicated workforce. Available estimates indicate that frontline caseworker turnover rates have remained consistently high. The most recent publicly available data, from 2015, report a median national turnover rate of 25% and a rate of 22% in California (1). While these findings highlight the persistence of this issue, they also underscore the limitations of available data, emphasizing the need for standardized workforce tracking systems (2).

The causes of turnover within the child welfare workforce are complex and multifaceted, as interacting organizational, job-related, and worker-level factors all contribute. High stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout have been consistently identified as core predictors of turnover across various studies (3-6). Role ambiguity and inconsistencies between training and agency practice have also been associated with increased early departures. For example, workers who report training-practice mismatch are nearly five times more likely to leave within the first six months (7). High workload is consistently identified as a major contributor to turnover (3,5,7), particularly among less-experienced workers and those in the early stages of employment (5,7). Other organizational factors, such as perceptions of organizational culture and climate (4-6), the availability of organizational and supervisory support (6), and compensation, also remain strong predictors of turnover (3,5,6). Many of these factors may reinforce one another. For example, high workload can intensify stress and burnout, increasing turnover risk and, in turn, further raising workloads for remaining employees.

The 2025 National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW III) Child Welfare Workforce Report, which examined recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices, concluded that agencies “have considerable room for growth in adopting evidence-based hiring tools that enhance staff fit, performance, and retention” (8). Realistic Job Previews (RJPs) represent one promising approach when implemented alongside other evidence-based recruitment and retention strategies.

II. What is a Realistic Job Preview?

A realistic job preview (RJP) is a recruiting tool that provides potential

candidates with an honest and practical depiction of a job, including both its positive and challenging aspects (9). RJPs are designed to support informed self-selection, help candidates form realistic expectations, and foster perceptions of organizational transparency and trust (10). RJPs can be delivered in a variety of formats, including video, written materials (e.g., booklets or brochures), structured observations, and meetings with current staff (11). In child welfare, RJPs are most commonly delivered via video, as this format is considered both practical and well-suited to convey the realities of the work (10).

III. RJP Outcomes

Meta-Analytic Findings in the Broader Workforce

RJPs have been studied in various fields for decades. Across four key meta-analyses in the broader workforce, RJPs show modest but consistent effects in workforce outcomes. The research shows that the strongest and most reliable impact is on reducing turnover (12-15). An earlier meta-analysis found that RJPs can increase retention rates by 9 percentage points, with stronger effects in highly complex roles (15). While child welfare was not included in these studies, the field's complexity suggests similar potential benefits. The research also suggests that RJPs, when shown in audiovisual formats, such as videos, are associated with improved job performance (12, 14).

RJPs also influence several related outcomes that support retention. These include better alignment of initial job expectations, increased organizational commitment and job satisfaction (12, 14), higher role clarity, and greater perceptions of organizational honesty (13). While earlier theories emphasized expectation management and applicant self-selection as the primary mechanisms behind positive RJP outcomes (14), more recent meta-analytic evidence suggests that perceived organizational honesty may be a key influential factor. In other words, RJPs signal transparency and trustworthiness, and candidates who perceive the organization as honest are more likely to stay (13).

Human Services and Child Welfare Outcome Data

Although systematic evaluations of RJPs specific to child welfare are limited, the available studies show promising benefits for improving retention, aligning expectations, and building organizational trust. One review notes that this sector is well-positioned for RJP implementation because early

turnover is common and many applicants enter the field to help children and families, but may not fully understand the challenges and demands of the work (10). In this study, child welfare HR personnel and other key informants reported that RJPs were beneficial for recruitment, selection, and retention either because new hires entered with a more accurate understanding of the job or because applicants opted out earlier in the hiring process (10).

The Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS) conducted one of the most detailed, though still preliminary, RJP evaluations available. In 2005, the agency invested approximately $27,000 to produce and implement an RJP video. At the same time, they estimated that the turnover cost for a single child welfare worker exceeded $50,000. This cost comparison suggests a strong potential return on investment (16).

Among the 85 newly hired employees in the study group, the turnover rate during the first year was 6.2% among those who viewed the RJP, compared with 21.6% among those who did not. Follow-up survey data collected eight months after hire further suggested that the RJP improved job satisfaction, strengthened workers' ability to cope with job pressures, and enhanced perceptions of organizational honesty during the recruitment process (16).

A subsequent analysis conducted by the University of Michigan reinforced these findings. Using longitudinal data from a sample of 315 new hires, researchers found that only 12% of those who had watched the RJP had left the agency after 18 months, compared to 21.7% of those who had not (10).

Similar patterns have been observed in other states. In Maine, where first-year turnover was already low, the rate dropped from 3.84% to 1.88% based on averages from the four years following implementation of the RJP. However, because RJPs were introduced alongside other workforce initiatives, these improvements cannot be attributed solely to the RJP (10). Evidence from other human service organizations also aligns with these trends. For example, Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, which provides residential services to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, reported a reduction in turnover from 69% to 28% over 18 months after implementing a multi-format RJP, though details regarding the evaluation design were not available (17).

In summary, meta-analytic evidence from the broader workforce provides

robust and consistent support for RJP benefits, particularly reduced turnover. Although child welfare evaluations are more limited, the available findings show promising indications of similar benefits.

IV. Limitations of RJPs

While RJPs offer meaningful benefits, their influence is largely confined to outcomes related to improving job understanding and shaping early perceptions of the organization, particularly during early entry into the role (12, 13). Because they focus on expectations and perceptions rather than working conditions, RJPs cannot address deeper structural challenges that drive workforce instability, such as unmanageable caseloads, inadequate compensation, poor organizational culture and climate, or the quality of supervision. Counties should therefore avoid using RJPs as a standalone solution. Instead, RJPs are more effective when integrated into a comprehensive workforce recruitment and retention strategy that supports staff across different stages of their careers.

V. Research on the Format, Timing, and Length of RJPs

Format

Video is the most common RJP format used in child welfare. Sources suggest this format is preferred because it can vividly convey the emotional demands and lived experiences of the work (10) while also offering practical advantages such as consistency, ease of use, and cost-effectiveness (16). However, broader research identifies important trade-offs across formats:

- **Face-to-face RJPs** have demonstrated the greatest impact on reducing turnover and modest positive effects on job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The stronger effects may reflect the interactive nature of the format, which allows applicants to actively engage with the content and ask clarifying questions (12). More recent meta-analytical work shows the same general patterns related to turnover, though the differences weren't strong enough to be considered definitive (13).
- **Written RJPs** demonstrate a small but reliable effect on turnover and on reducing attrition during the recruitment process (12).
- **Video-based RJPs** show lesser effects on reducing turnover (12) but stronger effects on improving job performance (12, 14).

Recommendation: Counties should select RJP formats based on their resources and workforce needs. Although no studies directly test combining video or written RJPs with engagement activities, it is hypothesized that interaction may explain the stronger effects of face-to-face RJPs on turnover. Guidance for RJP implementation in human services also identifies a hybrid approach as a viable option (17). Therefore, counties may consider pairing video or written RJPs with structured engagement opportunities (e.g., facilitated discussion or Q&A) to help replicate the interactive benefits of in-person formats.

Timing

Evidence of the optimal timing for RJPs is mixed and context-dependent. Guidance on RJPs in human services generally recommends providing RJPs before a job offer is made (17), and limited evidence from Michigan Child Welfare suggests that pre-hire RJPs can be effective (16). However, broader research on optimal timing is mixed and highlights several tradeoffs:

- **Pre-hire RJPs** may support self-selection, but the evidence for this is mixed (12, 14). More recent research suggests that a key mechanism for reducing turnover is through strengthening perceptions of organizational honesty (13), while also helping candidates form a more realistic understanding of the role (12, 13). Some research suggests that RJPs delivered after a job offer, but before acceptance, are most effective at reducing turnover (12). At the same time, pre-hire RJPs can reduce organizational attractiveness, which may pose a risk for agencies with limited applicant pools (13).
- **Post-hire RJPs** eliminate opportunities for applicant self-selection. Still, the most recent meta-analysis suggests they reduce turnover by reinforcing perceptions of organizational honesty, which can be strengthened at any stage of the employment process. This timing also helps avoid shrinking the applicant pool (13) and may improve job performance (12).

Recommendation: Counties should align RJP timing with their primary workforce challenge and the mechanism they seek to activate:

- **Pre-hire** when the goal is to reduce early turnover through expectation alignment, early signaling of organizational honesty, and allowing

opportunities for self-selection.

- **Post-hire** when applicant volume is low or when strengthening role clarity and job performance are the primary objectives.
- **After the job offer but before acceptance,** it may act as a middle-ground option that preserves applicant volume while supporting expectation alignment, organizational honesty, and creating opportunities for self-selection.
- **Two-stage approach**, although not directly tested in research, a brief pre-hire RJP followed by a more in-depth post-offer or post-hire RJP may be helpful for counties facing low applicant volume and wanting to align expectations and reinforce organizational honesty at multiple points.

Length

Evidence regarding the optimal length of an RJP is limited. Most video-based RJPs in child welfare are approximately 30 minutes long (10). Michigan's Child Welfare RJP video, which was associated with reduced turnover, is 36 minutes long (16). Some broader workforce research suggests that RJPs longer than one hour may be slightly more effective at reducing turnover than shorter formats (13). However, it's possible these findings reflect the benefits of interactive face-to-face formats rather than video length alone.

Recommendation: Given the limited and mixed evidence on length, counties should select a duration that best aligns with their context and chosen format. A concise RJP video of about 30 minutes, paired with facilitated discussion or Q&A, may be one way to provide the depth without the fatigue of watching a long video, though this approach has not been empirically tested.

VI. Gaps in Existing Child Welfare RJPs

Research examining the content of existing child welfare video-based RJPs indicates that they tend to focus on experiences in the field, particularly working with families, witnessing abuse and neglect, and navigating challenging encounters or difficult living conditions (10, 18). Many videos also depict job-related stress and reference administrative demands, such as paperwork and unpredictable hours (10, 18). Despite capturing important aspects of the work, several gaps in existing child welfare RJPs have been identified:

- **Specific skills & training:** Few videos explicitly describe the skills required for the role or the training and preparation child welfare workers receive. Many videos focus on case-management tasks rather than core social work competencies, despite a significant pipeline of BSW and MSW graduates entering the workforce through Title IV-E programs (10).
- **Systemic realities:** Limited attention is given to the challenges of working within bureaucratic systems, including rigid rules, as well as the crucial roles of supervision, teamwork, and interagency collaboration (18).
- **Support systems:** Depictions of organizational, supervisory, and other emotional supports are minimal, despite these supports being key drivers of retention (18).
- **Cultural competence & equity:** Few RJPs meaningfully address cross-cultural practice (10) or the systemic inequities affecting families (18). One review cautions that emphasizing hostile interactions with parents may inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes, rather than framing family engagement through organizational values, ethics, and equity commitments (18).

To better understand these gaps, one analysis compared existing child welfare RJP content against established RJP mechanisms and child welfare workforce research. The table below synthesizes these findings, linking documented workforce challenges to RJP mechanisms and specific recommendations for improvement (18). Several recommendations extend beyond the RJP itself, which is why it's essential that counties strengthen the organizational structures and supports that impact their workforce. To maintain organizational honesty and maximize effectiveness, practices depicted in an RJP must genuinely exist within the organization.

Table 1 Alignment of Research, RJP Theory, and Recommendations

Child Welfare Research	RJP Mechanism	Recommendation
Organizational characteristics, administrative burden, and bureaucratic stressors are primary drivers of turnover.	Expectancy Theory: RJPs promote job satisfaction and reduce turnover by helping applicants form accurate expectations, anticipate challenges, and reduce shock and disappointment.	**Acknowledge the bureaucratic challenges of child welfare**, including administrative demands and the difficulty of starting a new job in a complex organization.
Perceived organizational and emotional support from supervisors and coworkers is critical to retention.	Social Exchange Theory: RJPs can signal organizational care and support of its employees, which can foster reciprocal commitment and increased retention.	**Demonstrate organizational care and concern for employee well-being** through explicit statements, behaviors, and examples. Encourage supportive supervision and peer relationships, emphasizing their value in reducing stress and cultivating trust.
Child welfare work is collaborative and embedded in complex social contexts (e.g., poverty, racism, and economic inequities).	Expectancy Theory: RJPs provide accurate depictions of the work, helping applicants understand what leads to success in the role and assess whether they can meet those demands, thereby reducing expectation–reality mismatch.	**Emphasize the collaborative nature of the profession and that success relies on teamwork and a systemic understanding of the social contexts** that impact child welfare work. Avoid overemphasizing individual heroism.
Intrinsic rewards matter,	Organizational Honesty	**Maintain transparency**

but extrinsic rewards help decrease burnout and support retention.	Theory: Balanced, truthful information provided in an RJP can strengthen employees' trust and commitment. Overstating positives reduces credibility and signals of organizational honesty.	**about the realities of child welfare work.** Avoid overstating the intrinsic rewards of supporting families while overlooking the systemic challenges. Acknowledge the role of recognition, competitive pay, manageable workloads, and clear pathways for advancement in staff retention.

VII. RJP Implementation Strategies

Implementation strategies will vary depending on the level of customization an organization pursues and on whether it produces an original RJP video. Key themes drawn from the CPS Human Services RJP Toolkit (16), Larson et al.'s chapter on RJPs in human service organizations (17), and guidance from the Office of Personnel Management (9) are outlined below:

1. Assess Needs and Organizational Readiness
    - Analyze turnover rates and related outcomes to determine whether an RJP will be a useful tool.
    - Establish leadership and the necessary buy-in to ensure the RJP is consistently used once it is developed.
    - Ensure the job description(s) are complete and accurate to inform the RJP content.

2. Plan the RJP
    - Establish a planning group and create a budget, timeline, and content plan.
    - Gather information from current employees about positive and challenging aspects of the job.
    - Identify expectation and knowledge gaps using feedback from recent hires.
    - Select an RJP format that aligns with the organization's resources and workforce needs.

3. Produce and Refine the RJP
    - Develop an initial draft of the RJP content.
    - Gather staff feedback and refine the RJP as needed.

4. Implement the RJP
    - Determine when and how the RJP will be delivered based on resources and workforce needs.
    - Ensure consistent application by requiring all applicants or new employees to view the RJP, or by intentionally establishing a comparison group for evaluation purposes that does not view it.

5. Evaluate the RJP
    - Identify clear metrics to track success (e.g., turnover rate, vacancy rate, job satisfaction, perceptions of organizational honesty).
    - Track outcomes over a set period of time (e.g., 6-12 months).
    - To accurately assess impact, attempt to minimize external variables by comparing results to a pre-RJP baseline or, where feasible, a comparison group that does not view the RJP.

Taken together, these strategies position RJPs as a feasible, evidence-informed tool that can strengthen recruitment and early retention when aligned with broader workforce supports.

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Appendix A. Summaries of Key RJP Studies and Resources

Meta-Analyses

Premack, S. L., & Wanous, J. P. (1985). A meta-analysis of realistic job preview experiments. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *70*(4), 706-719. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.70.4.706

An early meta-analysis of 21 RJP experiments found that RJPs overall have a modest impact on new employees' perceptions, attitudes, and job behaviors. Across eight outcomes, RJPs tended to lower initial job expectations, increase the number of candidates who withdrew from consideration, and slightly boost organizational commitment and job satisfaction. The most notable effects, though still modest, were observed in job retention and job performance, with the latter only showing meaningful effects when RJPs were delivered in audiovisual formats. Overall, most differences across studies were due to chance rather than real differences between groups, suggesting RJPs generally work the same way across settings. It should be noted that small negative effects on perceptions of organizational culture of honesty and support and coping ability were reported, though these findings were based on fewer studies with smaller sample sizes.

- Key Takeaway: While RJPs do not produce dramatic changes, they consistently deliver meaningful benefits in areas critical to workforce stability and effectiveness

McEvoy, G. M., & Cascio, W. F. (1985). Strategies for reducing employee turnover: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *70*(2), 342-353. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.70.2.342

Another foundational meta-analysis from the same time period examined 20 field experiments aimed at reducing turnover. The results indicated that RJPs can improve retention rates by approximately 9%. However, substantial variation in RJP effectiveness was observed across studies, and subsequent analyses identified job complexity as a potential factor influencing outcomes. Specifically, RJPs had a lower impact on reducing turnover for jobs with lower task complexity, such as those of clerks, telephone operators, and service representatives, compared to jobs with high task complexity, such as insurance sales and military. Although child welfare workers were not

included in these studies, their work is widely recognized as highly complex. This suggests that RJPs may be particularly beneficial in child welfare professions.

- Key Takeaway: RJPs have a modest but meaningful impact on turnover and may be more effective for roles characterized by high task complexity.

Phillips, J. M. (1998). Effects of realistic job previews on multiple organizational outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Academy of Management Journal*, *41*(6), 673-690. https://www.jstor.org/stable/256964

A meta-analysis of 40 studies of RJPs in both lab and field settings found that RJPs were linked to lower turnover, reduced initial expectations, and slightly less attrition during recruitment. RJPs were also associated with improved job performance. This study also found that the effectiveness of RJPs depends on how and when they are delivered. Verbal (face-to-face) delivery of RJPs had the strongest reductions in turnover and modest effects on satisfaction and commitment. Written RJPS had smaller, but still reliable effects on turnover. Video-based RJPs showed the greatest performance improvements but had a limited impact on turnover. One explanation for why verbal RJPs were shown to be more effective is that two-way communication is more actively engaging and allows for clarification and interaction, which may help applicants' understanding of job realities more effectively than one-way formats such as written or video presentations. Timing also played a role. RJPs were most effective at reducing turnover when delivered after a job offer, but before acceptance, rather than early in recruitment or after hiring. This timing was also associated with improved job performance.

- Key Takeaway: RJPs can lower turnover, reduce initial expectations, and improve job performance, but their impact depends on how and when they are delivered. Organizations can enhance the effectiveness of RJPs by aligning the timing and delivery format with their specific outcome goals.

Earnest, D. R., Allen, D. G., & Landis, R. S. (2011). Mechanisms Linking Realistic Job Previews with Turnover: A Meta-analytic Path Analysis. *Personnel Psychology*, *64*(4), 865-897. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.2011.01230.x

A 2011 meta-analysis of 52 studies examining the mechanisms linking RJPs to turnover reinforced findings from earlier reviews, indicating that RJPs are still a low-investment tool for modestly influencing turnover, even as workplaces evolve. Additionally, this review found that RJPs were associated with lower initial expectations, higher role clarity, and greater perceptions of organizational honesty. While previous theories emphasized expectation management or applicant self-selection as primary mechanisms linking RJP with turnover, this analysis identified perceptions of organizational honesty as the primary driver of retention. In other words, RJPs signal organizational transparency and trustworthiness, and candidates who perceive the organization as honest are more likely to stay. At the same time, RJPs were found to lower perceptions of organizational attractiveness, a key factor in recruitment. Therefore, RJPs may not be the most effective strategy when attracting applicants is more challenging than retaining employees. Finally, the study examined RJP timing, length, and format. Though the evidence was limited, trends suggest that oral (face-to-face) RJPs may reduce turnover more than other formats, while video had a greater impact on job acceptance and perceptions of organizational honesty. RJPs presented post-hire showed slight advantages over pre-hire RJPs, and longer RJPs (over 1 hour) showed slight advantages over shorter ones (less than 1 hour).

- Key Takeaway: RJPs consistently, but modestly, lower turnover, and signals of organizational honesty are a primary driver of retention. The most effective RJPs are oral, delivered post-hire, and designed to signal organizational honesty.

RJPs in Child Welfare and Human Services

CPS Human Resource Services and Champnoise, C. (2007). *The RJP Tool Kit: A How-To Guide for Developing a Realistic Job Preview*. Final Report. Cornerstone for Kids. http://ncwwi.org/files/Recruitment_Screening_Selection/The_RJP_ToolKit.pdf

The RJP Toolkit was developed to help child welfare agencies create realistic job previews that reduce early turnover. It provides an overview of RJPs, emphasizing their role in helping applicants self-select and highlighting video as the preferred format because it is cost-effective, easy to implement consistently, and can be impactful. The toolkit explains that a well-designed RJP, delivered at the right point in the hiring process, can decrease early attrition and also improve post-hire outcomes such as job satisfaction, coping with job challenges, and perceptions of organizational honesty. It outlines a 5 phase process to producing and implementing an RJP video: Preparedness, Planning, Production, Implementation, and Evaluation. A case study with the Michigan Department of Human Services was conducted using this 5-phase plan. Despite being preliminary and limited in sample size, this case study represents one of the few known systematically collected evaluations of RJP effectiveness in child welfare. Key findings include:

- Michigan DHS invested approximately $27,000 in producing its RJP video and estimated that the turnover cost for a single children's services worker exceeded $50,000, indicating a strong potential return on investment.
- Among the 88 newly hired employees, 93.8% of those who saw the RJP remained in the job for at least one year, compared to 78.4% of the non-RJP group
- Survey data collected eight months after hire further suggested that the RJP improved job satisfaction, enhanced workers' ability to cope with job pressures, and strengthened perceptions of organizational honesty during the recruitment process.

Faller, K. C., Masternak, M., Grinnell-Davis, C., Grabarek, M., Sieffert, J., & Bernatovicz, F. (2009). Realistic job previews in child welfare: state of innovation and practice. *Child Welfare*, *88*(5), 23-47. https://www.jstor.org/stable/45400437

This review examines the history of RJPs in child welfare, summarizes the content of 10 RJPs, and reports on RJP development and outcome data. It notes that the sector is well-positioned for RJP implementation, as early turnover is common and many applicants are motivated by a desire to help children and families, but may not fully realize the challenges of the work. Although all identified RJPs used a video format, their content varied. Most

emphasized working directly with families, job-related stress, and issues related to child abuse and neglect. Few addressed sexual abuse. Many videos also depicted collaboration with other agencies, court involvement, administrative demands, and organizational support. Few RJPs explicitly described the specific skills required for the role or the training workers receive. In addition, most videos highlighted case-management tasks rather than social work competencies, despite the pipeline of BSW and MSW graduates entering the workforce through Title IV-E programs. Finally, although all RJPs featured diverse staff, they made limited reference to cross-cultural practice or the skills needed to work effectively with families from varied backgrounds.

In this study, the 8 respondents of the telephone interview reported that RJPs were beneficial for recruitment, selection, and retention either because new hires entered with a more accurate understanding of the job or because applicants opted out earlier in the process. A few states provided preliminary outcome data. In Maine, RJPs were implemented with other recruitment initiatives, and the turnover rate decreased from 3.84% to 1.88% in the first year. This review also reported Michigan's case study, previously reviewed. Although the sample sizes were small in these studies, the findings suggest that RJPs may positively influence applicant self-selection, job expectations, and early retention.

The review concludes that RJPs are most effective when integrated into a broader recruitment and retention strategy, rather than used as a standalone tool and highlights themes from previous literature:

- Conduct a thorough job analysis to ensure the RJP accurately reflects the skills and knowledge required for the role.
- RJPs do not measure ability. Recruiters must still use structured testing or assessments to verify that applicants possess the necessary competencies.
- Personal outreach from current staff to new hires can be particularly valuable for conveying realistic information about the job and supporting informed decision-making.

Larson, S. A., O'Nell, S. N., & Sauer, J. K. (2012). What is this job all about? Using realistic job previews in the hiring process. In S. Larson & A. Hewitt (Eds.), *Staff recruitment, retention, and training strategies for community human services organizations* (pp. 47–73). Research and Training Center on Community Living, University of Minnesota. https://ici-s.umn.edu/files/FGtRH-K_y3/staff_recruitment_book.

Although this source focuses on the broader human services sector, its guidance appears to take into account a greater depth of RJP evidence than the previously reviewed RJP toolkit. This chapter, which is part of a book on recruitment, retention, and training for human services organizations, reviews literature on RJPs and highlights that RJPs are a vital component of a larger hiring strategy, particularly for organizations facing high turnover rates. By preventing unmet expectations, RJPs can significantly improve retention. The authors recommend starting with an analysis of turnover and vacancy rates to determine whether early turnover is a significant issue. It then outlines a series of steps for developing and implementing an RJP:

1. Ensure the job description is complete and accurate: A clear, up-to-date job description helps identify the topics that should be included in the RJP.
2. Gather or update information about positive and negative job characteristics from current employees
3. Identify expectation and knowledge gaps: Use feedback from recent hires to pinpoint where applicants have unrealistic expectations or knowledge gaps.
4. Develop a strategy to present the information to recruits: Choose a delivery method (e.g., videos, brochures, structured observations) that aligns with agency resources and needs.
5. Implement, evaluate, and refine the RJP: Test the RJP, gather applicant feedback, and refine. Implement for a set period (6–12 months) and track success metrics, potentially using a control group.

Critically, the authors emphasize that for the RJP to be effective, it must:

- Have a clear purpose to allow applicants to assess fit
- Use credible information, real people, and actual events
- Include information about how current employees feel about their jobs

- Balance positive and negative realities
- Be presented before or at the time of the job offer

The effectiveness of RJPs is illustrated by several case studies, including one from the Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota (LSS), which provides residential services to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. After implementing a multi-format RJP program, LSS saw a dramatic reduction in turnover: between July 2001 and December 2002 only 28% of RJP recipients left their positions, compared to 69% of the group who did not receive the RJP.

Smith, B. D., Prichard, C., & Boltz, L. D. (2016). Do child welfare job preview videos reflect evidence on retention and turnover? *Children and Youth Services Review*, *71*, 210-216. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.11.015

A content analysis of 14 publicly available child welfare video-based RJPs found that their content only partially aligned with established research on child welfare workforce retention and with evidence on the mechanisms that make RJPs most effective. The child welfare video-based RJPs mainly focused on experiences in the field. They showcased the rewards of supporting families and showed the challenges of difficult encounters. However, the videos offered limited attention to the realities of working within bureaucratic systems, such as strict rules and a demanding organizational climate. They also focused more on individual accomplishments, with little acknowledgement of supervision, teamwork, inter-agency collaboration, or the broader social contexts that impact child welfare. To further examine these gaps, the study compared the video content with research on child welfare recruitment and retention and with established theories of RJP effectiveness, which is summarized in Table 1.

The study also noted the similarities across child welfare video-based RJPs and attributed the consistency to the influence of the RJP Toolkit. Most notably, the authors critique aspects of the toolkit for promoting messaging that may unintentionally reinforce negative stereotypes or implicit bias. Rather than establishing an expectation of threat or danger from parents who encounter child welfare workers, this study argues that RJPs' design should align with organizational values and ethics and should consider how

portrayals may activate biases, stereotypes, and self-fulfilling prophecies.

Appendix B. How Job Seekers Perceive Recruitment Messaging: Decision-Making Style and Message Specificity

Job seekers do not interpret recruitment messages in the same way. Candidates may differ in how credible, attractive, or relevant they find the information, even when presented with the same recruitment message, such as a realistic job preview (RJP). Two studies examining individual decision-making style and the level of specificity in recruitment messages suggest that recruitment effectiveness may be enhanced by aligning message design with how candidates process information (Liu et al., 2018; Roberson et al., 2005).

Key Takeaways

1. **Candidates process recruitment messages differently.**
   People vary in how they interpret job information. Some evaluate content analytically, while others rely more on tone, messenger cues, and general impressions. Therefore, recruitment messaging may be more effective when it accommodates both processing tendencies.

2. **Decision-making style shapes credibility judgments of RJPs.**
   - **Satisficers** rely more on peripheral cues. They tend to find RJPs more credible when written in an employee voice and when the messenger's background aligns with the job level being described.
   - **Maximizers** scrutinize substance. Their credibility judgments are generally less affected by tone or messenger background. They are more influenced by the message's informational content.
   - **Balanced information** that includes both positive aspects and mild challenges in an RJP tends to increase credibility among both groups.

3. **Message specificity influences how applicants evaluate organizations.**
   - **Specific recruitment messages** (e.g., concrete details about pay, training, professional development opportunities, and work environment) lead to stronger perceptions of organizational attributes and person-organization fit.
   - **General recruitment messages** typically prompt greater reliance

on surface-level impressions such as organizational attractiveness and broad perceptions of person-organization (P-O) fit.

4. **Person-organization fit is a strong predictor of application intentions.** Across both general and specific messaging conditions, perceived P-O fit reliably predicts whether applicants intend to apply. Evidence suggests that P-O fit fully mediates the relationship between message specificity and application intentions. In other words, detailed information appears to increase intentions to apply primarily because it strengthens applicants' perceptions of fit with the organization

Differences in Information Processing

Foundational social psychology literature suggests that people approach information processing in distinct ways.

- **Naïve scientists** refer to the idea that individuals may approach decision-making by systematically searching for information, weighing costs and benefits, and updating expectations accordingly (Heider, 1958). These individuals are more likely to engage in central route processing, carefully evaluating the content, evidence, and logic of a message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).
- **Cognitive misers** are understood to conserve cognitive effort by relying on mental shortcuts and quick cues (Fiske and Taylor, 1984). They tend to use peripheral route processing, drawing on instinct, tone, and surface-level impressions (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

Although both approaches can be used by the same person depending on the situation, individuals tend to favor one processing style more consistently. These tendencies form part of the conceptual basis of the two decision-making styles commonly described as satisficers and maximizers (Simon, 1956; Campitelli & Gobet, 2010; Evans, 2008).

Decision-Making Style Shapes How Candidates Judge Credibility of RJPs

One study examined how the two decision-making styles influence credibility judgments by presenting job seekers with written RJPs that varied in tone, messenger background, and message valence (positive versus negative

framing) (Liu et al., 2018). Results suggest that satisficers were more impacted by the tone and messenger background, whereas maximizers were not. This pattern likely reflects maximizers' greater reliance on analytic evaluation, as tone and messenger cues provide limited substantive information. However, both groups perceived balanced RJPs (those presenting positive aspects alongside mild challenges) as more credible. The table below summarizes key differences in how these decision-making styles shape responses to recruitment messaging.

Feature	Satisficers	Maximizers
Processing route	More likely to rely on peripheral processing and mental shortcuts	More likely to engage in central processing and analytic evaluation
Primary focus	Presentation cues and the overall "human feel" of the message	The substance, depth, and completeness of the information
Tone	Perceived as more credible when written in an employee voice rather than a formal corporate tone	Perception of credibility is generally unaffected by the tone
Messenger background information	Higher credibility when the messenger's background aligns with the job level (e.g., professional expertise for management roles; relatable/personal background for frontline roles	Perception of credibility is generally unaffected by the message provider's background
Message Valence	Balanced messages (positive aspects plus mild	Balanced messages (positive aspects plus mild

	challenges) increase credibility	challenges) increase credibility

Message Specificity Shapes How Applicants Process Information

Foundational persuasion research suggests that individuals process messages through different cognitive routes depending on the level of detail provided.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The ELM proposes two routes to persuasion:

- Central route: Involves careful evaluation of argument strength
- Peripheral route: Relies on surface-level cues or general impressions

Marketing research suggests that message specificity strengthens central processing and leads to more favorable cognitive responses (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981) and more positive brand evaluations (Benoit, 1987).

How Message Specificity Shapes Applicant Reactions

Roberson et al. (2005) applied the ELM to recruitment by providing participants with either specific or general information about compensation, benefits, training, and professional development opportunities. The study then assessed applicants' perceptions of organizational attributes, person–organization (P-O) fit, and intentions to apply.

Specific Information Leads to More Positive Applicant Reactions

Participants who received specific recruitment messages, including concrete details about compensation, training hours, tuition reimbursement, flexible work arrangements, and professional development opportunities, reported more positive reactions across several outcomes:

- **Higher perceptions of organizational attributes**, including pay and benefits, job and career opportunities, and work environment

- **Higher perceptions of person-organization fit**, likely because detailed information allowed applicants to more accurately assess compatibility
- **Higher intentions to apply**, although this effect was fully mediated by perceived P-O fit. In other words, message specificity increased intentions to apply primarily because it strengthened applicants' perceptions of fit with the organization.

Importantly, message specificity did not significantly affect general perceptions of organizational attractiveness. Instead, it appeared to provide enough substantive information for applicants to form more accurate evaluations of what the organization offers and how well they align with it.

General Information Prompts Greater Reliance on Peripheral Impressions
When recruitment messages were general or vague (e.g., statements like "convenient job-related training" or "benefits and programs that achieve a healthy and balanced life"), applicants appeared more likely to rely more on broad, surface-level impressions:

- **Perceptions of organizational attractiveness played a larger role** in shaping intentions to apply
- **Person-organization fit continued to predict intentions to apply**, likely reflecting general impressions of compatibility rather than detailed assessment

This pattern aligns with ELM predictions: general messages are more likely to trigger peripheral processing, whereas specific messages support deeper, central evaluation.

Person–Organization Fit as a Key Mediator
Across both message conditions, perceived person-organization fit was the strongest and most consistent predictor of intentions to apply. Evidence suggests that P-O fit fully mediated the relationship between message specificity and application intentions, indicating that specificity increased intentions primarily by strengthening perceived compatibility with the organization. P-O fit also mediated intentions under low-specificity messaging conditions, suggesting that even general recruitment information can spark initial, broad impressions of fit that influence application decisions.

Practical Implications of the Research

1. Tailor recruitment materials to different information-processing styles
Provide multiple formats that allow candidates to self-select the level of depth they prefer. For example, organizations can pair an RJP with an optional detailed document outlining average caseloads, supervisory/ peer support structures, workload expectations, and professional development opportunities.

2. Use employee-voiced content to increase authenticity
Employee-voiced recruitment messaging, such as RJPs or testimonials, can increase credibility for candidates who rely more on interpersonal and relational cues. Importantly, this approach does not appear to disadvantage candidates who lean towards more analytic processing.

3. Align the messenger with the role when using testimonials
Consider using expertise-based messengers (e.g., experienced supervisors or managers) for professional or leadership roles and more relatable, personality-based messengers for frontline positions. This alignment can strengthen credibility among candidates who rely on similarity and social cues when evaluating information.

4. Present balanced information to build trust
RJPs that include both positive aspects of the role and realistic challenges can signal transparency and honesty. Balanced messaging has been shown to increase perceived credibility across different processing and decision-making styles.

5. Include specific, concrete details to support accurate fit assessments
Providing specificity, such as clear descriptions of job demands, training expectations, career development pathways, and organizational support structures, can help candidates more accurately evaluate P-O fit. Perceived P-O fit is a strong and consistent predictor of intentions to apply.

6. Use general recruitment messaging strategically
More general recruitment messaging is useful when the goal is to generate an initial sense of broad alignment, particularly in the early stages of the recruitment process. Emphasizing organizational mission, values, and culture can provide heuristic cues that support early engagement. However, general

messaging is more effective when paired with pathways to more detailed information, allowing applicants who engage in analytical processing to access the depth of content they prefer.

7. Prioritize person–organization fit throughout recruitment information
Across specific and general recruitment messaging, perceptions of P-O fit consistently shaped candidates' intentions to apply. RJPs and other recruitment efforts should therefore provide meaningful opportunities for candidates to understand how their values, goals, and preferences may align with the organization.

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