

# Looking for an 'outside the box' hire? You might get a rule-bending narcissist

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Employers and recruiting firms aiming for high-performing self-starters frequently sprinkle job postings with terms like "ambitious," "thinks outside the box," "communicates persuasively" and "thinks strategically."

However, according to a [forthcoming](#) *Management Science* study, available on the SSRN server, that includes a University of Maryland researcher, such attractive keywords signify that firms are looking for what the authors classified as "rule benders" versus "rule followers," disproportionally reeling in narcissistic applicants. Other research has shown such employees to be more likely to engage in unethical or fraudulent behavior.

Recruiters consume "tons of practitioner advice out there on how to avoid hiring narcissists, while unaware such terms draw such candidates," said Associate Professor of Accounting Nick Seybert at UMD's Robert H. Smith School of Business.

Seybert and co-authors Scott Jackson of the University of South Carolina and Jonathan Gay of the University of Mississippi focused their research on the [accounting](#) field because, as Seybert said, it is an area where narcissists and rule benders may have the most immediate negative impact.

"We show that narcissists are more attracted to rule-bender language in job postings both for general jobs and for accounting positions," Seybert said. "We then show that professional recruiters are more likely to include rule-bender language in job postings for more innovative and higher-growth companies, as well as for companies that would benefit from manipulating their earnings."

To conduct the study, the authors tested online participants ([college graduates](#) recruited through a research crowdsourcing platform) for their level of narcissism, then tested to see if they were more attracted to positions described with rule-bender terms. They did a similar study of experienced accounting managers, and also studied factors that influence why professional recruiters choose to use such language.

The findings, Seybert added, "suggest that even before a single job seeker has clicked 'apply,' language contained in a job posting may be too seductive for narcissists to ignore, increasing the chances of attracting unethical applicants to the position.

"But an overriding takeaway is that 'rule-bender' language enters job postings both intentionally and unintentionally, with the outcome being that the applicant pool will have a much larger percentage of narcissists," he said.

**More information:** Jonathan Gay et al, Seductive Language for Narcissists in Job Postings (2024). [DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.4866862](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4866862)

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