Is Judgment Fatigable?
Considering the Case of Employee Selection Panels

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ABSTRACT

Decision fatigue theory asserts that judgment wanes with repeated decision-making because mental resources are depleted. Management consultants and journalists have taken up this concept with considerable vigour, based on limited empirical evidence. This paper challenges that theory. The authors’ study sought to demonstrate decision fatigue in public sector employee selection panels composed of multiple decision makers who made multiple serial decisions. They found little evidence that the judgment of individual decision makers was swayed by fatigue.

Keywords: Decision Making, Ego Depletion, Employment Panels, Expert Decision Making, Mental Effort

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INTRODUCTION

The Nobel laureate in behavioural economics Daniel Kahneman (2011) argues that judgment is fatiguable. In support of this hypothesis he cites a study of Israeli parole boards in which eight judges working independently of each other reviewed a total 1,112 applications for parole. Every day a judge considered 14-35 cases in random order taking an average of six minutes for each case. That study, by Danzinger, Levav and Avnaim-Pesso (2011), found that parole was more likely to be granted at the beginning of the day or after a meal break. The study subsequently received considerable publicity through Tierney’s (2011) discussion in the *New York Times Magazine* which examined other recent research in social psychology on decision fatigue. Following this, websites popularising the concept of decision fatigue have mushroomed. Management journalists and consultants have been particularly prominent in offering advice to readers on strategies for minimising the deleterious impact of fatigue on business decisions (for instance, Green 2011; Brablc 2013; Woolley 2013).

This study examines the decisions of a public sector selection panel for positions in a hospital pool of specialist anaesthetists in Australia. The selection process provided a natural experiment with which to seek to demonstrate fatiguability. While not guaranteeing employment for the applicant anaesthetists, selection into the pool provided them with the opportunity to work in the medical facility. Over two days, seven panellists interviewed sixty-three applicants for this specialist medical role. One panellist was a medical administrator, one a non-medical administrator and the remaining five were senior anaesthetists. All those interviewed held relevant Australian qualifications, were *prima facie* appointable, and there was no cap on the number appointed.

The primary aim of studying the panel’s decisions was to investigate whether the judgment of individual members altered during the course each decision-making session, and if so, the effect on the quality of their decisions. We found no evidence that the judgment of individual decision makers was swayed by fatigue. To present these findings, we begin with a review of the literature on decision making and fatigue. We then outline the method used in our present analysis, and follow this with a discussion of the results. In the final section, we examine possible reasons why our findings diverged from the parole board study based on different characteristics of the two circumstances, before concluding our analysis. Throughout, we have focused heavily on the parole board study because it provides both a stimulus and comparator for further investigation of this issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While in various disciplines, there has been considerable research suggesting that decision-making ability declines with fatigue, it was Danzinger, Levav and Avnaim-Pesso’s influential study in 2011 of judicial rulings by Israeli
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