



Opinion. Organizational Justice in E-recruiting: issues and controversies.

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Abstract

The recruitment situation has high stakes both for the potential new employer and candidates. This article highlights the technology-led transformation occurring in organization's recruitment processes and argues that more attention is needed to assess how far these systems actually widen the applicant pool, or whether they mask the replication of previous discriminatory practices. It raises questions about the transparency of the process, and the accountability of recruiters to applicants noting the procedural and distributive justice implications of these changes.

A quiet revolution is occurring in the processes with which European organisations recruit new employees. Whilst this is not news to North American readers, European readers will note with interest that with the rise of web-based recruitment, three critical recruiting processes have been transformed: how organizations attract, search for and choose applicants. As practice creeps ahead of research, attention needs to focus on how far these systems are replicating earlier discrimination patterns and increasing concerns about the manner in which applicant information is garnered and distributed. With the overall objective of web-based recruiting being an expansion of the potential pool, and thus choice of applicants, the question is whether this objective is really being achieved. The evidence indicates otherwise. Whilst these new systems benefit the organisation, limited attention has considered their impact on applicants: in particular the transparency and accountability surrounding the supervision of these data collection and dissemination systems. In addition, many of these *e*-recruiting processes employ covert applications, based on data – mining techniques, to gather more information about applicants' behaviours. Within this high stakes environment the costs to candidates of calling into question these practices are high. Withdrawal from the process is also risky as the potential penalties of not applying via the web are exclusionary too.

The background to this story is a familiar one. The volume of employment applications received by blue-chip firms has long necessitated the use of technology to assist with the storage, retrieval and transmission of data. The advent of the World Wide Web and new data-mining technology has improved the potential scope of this management tool. Indeed for many firms it is now the only means that new applications can be made, replacing their paper-based systems. Although candidates can apply through traditional

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media, there might be a cost; recruiters perceive those who use paper applications as friendlier than their on-line competitors, but also as less intelligent and computer-literate (Elgin and Chapman, 2000). Indeed, much attention from practitioners has focused on the efficiency benefits of these processes with limited interest on more fundamental questions of privacy, fairness and their underlying ethics.

The functionality of web based recruitment is threefold. In addition to providing information to applicants, these sites enable organisations to present job previews (Highhouse et al; forthcoming) and to pre-screen applicants to ensure their organisational fit (Dineen et al; in press). Such processes appear to maintain the positive standing of the organisation even if the candidate is rejected. It is, however, in the area of candidate search where the most controversy arises. The advent of jobs message boards has greatly increased the speed and variety of vacancies which applicants can access. They are popular with applicants (Zusman and Landis; in press). Accordingly, the role of the executive ‘head-hunter’ has been made more efficient through email, or search engines, to identify and contact on a global basis those on their books about forthcoming jobs. Increasingly covert means are being used to search for potential applicants by accessing user chat rooms (termed “flipping”), or gain covert access into organisation’s intranets (termed “peeling”) (Boehle, 2000; Silverman, 2000; Harris and Dewar, 2001). Moreover, increases in the creation and access to credit-rating and other personal databases has spawned the growth in firms offering candidate authentication services, ranging from verifying degree results to establishing credit histories.² Several web sites also offer salary comparison data in return for personal details, such as job role, and location and others enable organisations to pre-screen candidates via bespoke ability tests.

Whilst the efficiency argument for web-based recruiting seems convincing enough, closer examination of the practice reveals a number of serious procedural justice issues, all of which relate to the amount of control a candidate has over (a) the decision to disclose personal information and (b) the relative distribution of their personal information once it is disclosed. Broader distributive justice concerns arise when data concerning access to the opportunities these sites offer in the first place are considered

The first concern relates to the imperative to comply with all the information requirements of web – based recruitment. For example, a refusal to authorise a verification procedure is more likely to be seen as an admission of guilt than a stand against the intrusiveness of the questions. Moreover, a main drawback of on-line testing is the inability to verify candidates. In an unsupervised testing session, firms do not know exactly who they are assessing and whether the candidate has additional resources, including people, assisting them. The drive to check candidates increases the requirement to gather, store, retrieve and check personal identification data. As a further means of controlling cheating, additional information, such as item response speed and accuracy levels, may be collected. Many firms do not have the skills to develop these tests themselves and so specialist test developers are employed to create these systems, either under their own brand, or under that of the recruiting organisation, therefore spreading

² The recent high profile Davy scandal for the New Zealand government shows the potential scale of the cost of not checking candidates CVs.

candidates' data ever wider. In some cases the candidate may not be aware that they are even accessing a third party's site. The involvement of third party contractors and the questionable accuracy of their databases (Evans, 2002) further reduces candidate's ability to control information flow.

The second concern relates to the amount of control an applicant has over their details once they have been released during web-based recruitment (Eddy, Stone and Stone Romero, 1999). Provision of notice that one's application details will be made available internally or externally is vital in this regard. The mere knowledge that one has applied for a new job can have serious consequences for relationships with current employers. Furthermore, putting oneself forward for a job can be the opportunity to gain promotion and to be seen in a new light. Controlling information disclosure is inherently entwined with issue of self-presentation (Tyler, 1989). Such data assist in developing, or maintaining, social identities and so knowing the extent of others' knowledge about oneself is vital in the creation of an identity to fit into new surroundings (Aronoff and Wilson, 1985).

The final concern relates to overall participation in web-based recruiting. Given that the reported purpose of these tools is to widen the potential pool of applicants for the larger, blue chip company, and widespread executive positions, it seems odd that participation in these on-line recruiting systems is skewed towards white males from higher-socio economic groups (Sharf, 2002). As a result we must challenge how far these systems can actually increase the applicant pool. One would have to be extremely naïve to not consider that the real purpose of these sites is to create a client base, capturing 'more of the same' rather than (for example) a more gender - and ethnicity - diverse sample. Participation from minority groups and women becomes a more pressing concern when examining which organisations are using this new medium, and the job categories to which they are applying it. Anecdotal evidence suggests that those firms with high numbers of applicants to highly paid executive jobs, such as financial services, are early adopters.

This problem is exacerbated by the use of online ability tests to screen candidates. Evidence suggests that ability tests are good predictors of job performance (Robertson and Smith, 2001), but there remains on-going concern about their discrimination against members of minority groups (Dewberry, 2001). The advent of this new medium may merely compound this adverse impact as those with more computer experience are more likely to perform best (Klinch, 2002). Unsurprisingly the group with most pc experience are white males from higher socio-economic groups. We can thus only speculate about the quality of opportunities from which traditional minority or disempowered groups have been inadvertently removed.

The recruitment situation has high stakes both for the potential new employer, but also for the unsuccessful candidate who remains with their previous firm. More attention needs to be paid to how far these systems actually widen the applicant pool, or whether they mask the replication of previous discriminatory practices. The ability of candidates to control the diffusion of data in the recruitment context has always been a contentious

issue. The increasing role of *e*-recruiting practices requires us to examine procedural and distributive justice implications thereof, as well as the efficiency advantages for the organizations that use them. This short article has raised questions about the transparency of the process, and the accountability of recruiters to applicants. At one level in choosing to search for a new job a candidate transfers power to others, but these new practices arguably make the candidate more vulnerable as they do not necessarily know who the 'others' are.

Suggested search engine topics:

Pre-employment screening, job search, psychometric testing online

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