

# Experiencing Recruitment and Selection: A Narrative Study

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## Objectives

Many words have been dedicated to a discussion about the nature of management research in academic journals. At the heart of this discussion is the question of whether management research should be *about* managers or *for* managers. Mode 2 management researchers (e.g. Tranfield & Starkey, 1998) argue that a defining characteristic to management research is its applied nature. Without this, management research risks what Burgoyne (1993) calls 'academic fundamentalism'; i.e. research becomes a series of findings and theories with little reference to managerial realities. This analysis is a warning to management researchers to check that their interests are relevant to the managerial communities that they are addressing.

There are several reasons why the time is right to test the managerial relevance of the recruitment and selection literature. First, it has long been known that there is some disjunction between recruitment and selection literature and managerial practice. One good example of this is Smith and Abrahamsen's (1992) paradox. These researchers surveyed managerial selection in the UK and Norway and observed that the most commonly used selection methods are those generally thought to possess the poorest predictive validities of the mainstream personnel selection methods (e.g. interviews, CVs, and reference checks). This finding was replicated in other countries in subsequent surveys of managerial selection (e.g. Ryan, McFarland, Baron & Page 1999). Second, much recruitment and selection research is conducted on graduate populations. However, due to the unrealistic expectations of work (Keenan & Newton, 1986) and the relative absence of work experience (Nicholson & Arnold, 1991), there are concerns about how powerfully we can extrapolate from this particular population (Anderson, 2003; Searle, 2003). Third, one of the reasons why graduate populations are used is to increase the sample size of both the applicant field and the number of selected applicants; these greatly help with the statistics. However, these vacancies are themselves unusual as the vast majority of recruitment and selection episodes involve many people competing for one vacancy and extrapolating from multi-opening opportunities is risky.

The purpose of the present study, therefore, is to capture the views of people involved in recruitment and selection to discover their priorities and concerns, and to see whether these are foci in the literature. Are these topics receiving the attention of researchers? To answer this question, the present study employs the technique of storytelling to gather qualitative data about the experiences of people involved in personnel selection in the UK.

## Method

As part of their Professional Certificate in Management, students were asked to relate a recent recruitment and selection experience as an applicant or selector, to analyse this episode using course ideas, and to develop some managerial implications. In addition to sending a copy of their assignment to their tutor for marking, students were asked to send a copy of the

assignment to the researcher for research purposes. It was made clear to students that sending in a copy of the assignment to the researcher was optional and that it would not have any impact upon their course performance. Students were asked not to send in their assignment if it did not relate a real event. Submission was anonymous, although 89.9% of students voluntarily gave away their identity. 99% of the population were in employment; 77% of which were employed as managers.

Over a two-year period, 268 students (approx 20%) submitted a story for inclusion in the study: 56% male and 44% female. Once filtered for comprehension 245 stories were included in the study. 123 (50.2%) of the stories were told from the perspective of the selector. 106 (43.2%) of the stories were told from the perspective of the applicant. 12 of the stories were told from the perspective of a third party. Four of the stories could not be categorised in this manner.

## Results

Sadly, given the length constraints, I am only able to provide a brief description of the results. Here I reveal the six most commonly occurring issues in the stories with a short explanation of each. These issues are interviews, internal versus external applicants, the impact of failure on internal applicants, differences between internal and external applicants, market forces and attention to detail.

### Interviews

Not surprisingly, the most commonly occurring theme in the stories is of poor interviewing. Many of these stories make appalling reading, and confirm what we have always known: interviewers can be a law unto themselves and there will always be some rogues out there. Hopefully, these reports are not the tip of the iceberg and instead represent painful memories of idiosyncratic interviewers. Whilst these appalling stories stand out due to their dramatic and humorous nature, it must be said that there were a number of stories from interviewers describing how they felt poorly prepared and afraid to express themselves.

### Internal versus external applicants

The main issue that the applicants focused on in this section was the competition between internal and external candidates. In short, internal applicants felt that they were being treated callously by being made to jump through all the hoops that external applicants were. They complained that the 'metaphorical level playing field' (Webb, 1997, p. 160) failed to acknowledge their commitment and history with the organisation. External applicants have a different perspective; their concern is that decisions have already been made in favour of internal applicants. Selectors, on the other hand, found it difficult to compare the attributes of internal and external applicants given the information asymmetries between the two populations.

### Impact of failure on internal applicants

Many of the submitted stories illustrate the impact of failure on internal applicants. These are people who, having failed to get a job, have to return to the workplace. Usually people know they've been unsuccessful and, handled in the wrong way (or not handled at all), this can lead to very serious consequences. The stories include examples of sickness, stress, anger, resentment and exit.

### Differences between internal and external applicants

These stories reveal the different motivations of internal and external applicants. By and

large, internal applicants apply for reasons of promotion or advancement. External applicants, on the other hand, apply for jobs for a wide range of reasons: redundancy, relocation, dissatisfaction and frustration with the current employer, a desire for permanent work and so on. Promotion is much less prominent. Broadly speaking, the majority of external applicants view a new employer as salvation from their current plight. Many external applicants are prepared to take a 'lower' job than their current or previous one in order to gain entry to a more attractive employer. The reasoning seems to be that they will quickly work their way up the new organisation once they gain entry.

These differing motivations have an implication for selection. With internal applicants, selectors know how well they 'fit in'. As a result, more emphasis is placed on how the internal applicant will rise to the challenges of the 'higher level' job. Assessors of external applicants also need to assess how their subjects will perform in the job, but they seem to place more emphasis on an assessment of how they will get on with the people and the different organisation.

### Market forces

The selectors reported two problems associated with market forces: too many applicants and too few. When there were too many applicants shortlisting became a haphazard process. Sometimes applicant undersupply was so severe that employers resorted to employing anyone remotely qualified who applied for the position.

Market forces also have a considerable impact on the people who accept jobs. Sometimes economic pressures mean that people have to take jobs that they know they are not going to suit. Another aspect of market forces on the applicant is how the selection method can alter the relationship between the potential employer and employee. Most of the time, these stories suggest that the potential employer has the power to pick and choose whom to recruit and yields considerable power over the nervous applicant, who is keen for promotion or salvation. At other times, such as when there are considerable skill shortages, the tide changes completely and it becomes a seller's market. In such situations of high demand and skill shortages, the few rare people who might be able to do the job take control of the process. They dictate how they will be treated, what rewards they will accept, which selection techniques might be used and so forth.

### Attention to detail

Small things seem to matter to applicants. They are, after all, entering the unknown and keen to find out as much about a potential employer as possible. They are inquisitive, eagle-eyed, ever on the look out for any sign that might give an indication of what the organisation is like. Whether it is sticking to the schedule, the accuracy of directions, the receptionist's knowledge of arrivals, an appropriate waiting area, or being offered refreshments on arrival, applicants pay incredible attention to detail. More than 25% of applicants cited administrative problems, attention to detail, and lack of professionalism in their stories and for many who decided to abandon their application mid-way through it appears to have been a major driver.

### Conclusion

The six main themes that emerged from these stories reflect the main concerns of applicants and recruiters. Of these, only one, interviews, has been the subject of much research interest. The others are conspicuous by their absence and yet these are the most pressing concerns for people involved in recruitment and selection episodes. This may not be important if these concerns do not influence recruitment and selection decisions or subsequent behaviour. But this is not the case. Even something that might appear trivial – attention to detail – influences

applicants' decisions on whether to continue with their application. The factor of market forces appears to have the capacity to exert major influence over applicants' behaviour and selectors' decision-making. In short, the findings of this study suggest that in the recruitment and selection domain there are matters where there is a divergence between the concerns of researchers and those on the receiving end.

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