

On the Receiving End: An Exploratory Study of Managerial Selection in the United Kingdom

Jon Billsberry, The Open University¹

Abstract

This paper reports on a qualitative study exploring perceptions of managerial selection in the United Kingdom. Via storytelling, 264 managers described their most memorable experience of selection. These stories relate the perceptions of both applicants and selectors. Two types of data were extracted from the stories. First, despite the selective focus of the respondents, it was possible to provide additive data on the source of applicants and their reasons for application. Results showed that 48% of vacancies contained only external applicants, 16% were open in internal applicants only, and 33% were contested by both internal and external candidates. Overwhelmingly, the prime reason for internal applicants to apply for posts was for promotion whereas external applicants described a much broader range of reasons for their application. Second, a number of themes were apparent in the stories. These included an analysis of the differences between internal and external candidates, the different types of fit that selectors try to examine, the role of market forces in recruitment and selection episodes, the nature of contemporary interviewing, and applicants' attention to detail. In addition, it is noted that selectors did not include any mention of job analysis, job descriptions, reliability, or validity in their stories, raising concerns that they are adopting a non-scientific approach.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of studies examined the extent to which different methods were used by organisations in the UK to select managers (e.g. Clark, 1992; Mabey, 1989; Robertson & Makin, 1986; Williams, 1991). This work was extended with international comparative studies (e.g. Clark, 1993; Di Milia, Smith & Brown, 1994; Gowing & Slivinski, 1994; Shackleton & Newell, 1991, 1994) and with surveys of non-managerial selection, often involving an international element (e.g. Ryan, McFarland, Baron & Page, 1999; Smith, 1991; Smith & Abrahamsen, 1992; Smith & George, 1992). These studies discovered that interviews, references, and CV and application blank assessment are by far the most common methods of managerial selection and that the pattern of selection is broadly similar in the countries surveyed (Lévy-Leboyer, 1994; Ryan et al, 1999; Shackleton & Newell, 1994; Smith & Abrahamsen, 1992).

In addition to these general findings, some interesting detail emerged. Smith and

¹ All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jon Billsberry, Centre for Human Resource and Change Management, Open University Business School, The Open University, Milton Keynes MK8 0DA, United Kingdom; +44 (0) 1908 655888; Fax +44 (0) 1908 655898; electronic mail may be sent to j.billsberry@open.ac.uk.

Abrahamsen (1992) noted the paradox that the most commonly used selection methods are those generally thought to possess the poorest predictive validities of the mainstream personnel selection methods. Shackleton and Newell (1994) provided some insight relevant to this paradox. They asked organisational respondents (they targeted Personnel Directors) in Germany, Italy and Belgium to give their perceptions of the success of the different managerial selection methods. In all countries, the interview was the highest scoring method with a mean score of 4.3 on a 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good) scale. Selection based on the data in application forms and references were seen as the next most successful methods of selection. The selection methods with higher reported predictive validities – assessment centres, personality tests and cognitive tests – received only moderate ratings. The rarely used methods of biodata, astrology and handwriting analysis (although this was more common in French-speaking Belgium) were also perceived to be the least successful selection methods. The findings of these studies are supported by a more recent and more extensive survey of selection practices in 959 companies in 20 countries (Ryan et al, 1999). This study found that national differences account for considerable variances in selection practices, but that organisation size does not.

These surveys of selection practice have also focused on the organisational participants involved in managerial selection. Some interesting differences between the countries surveyed have been found. The most striking of these being that in Italian companies members of the personnel department are not included in interviews 63% of the time. In comparison, in German, French and Belgian companies such people are involved in interviews 68% of the time (Shackleton & Newell, 1994). In contrast, no significant differences were found in the presence of line managers in interviews across the countries surveyed. As Shackleton and Newell (1994) say, 'in all countries the vast majority of companies always involved a line manager (p. 97)'.

We also have some data on the types of interviews that are used that suggests that there are significant differences between the countries surveyed (Shackleton & Newell, 1994). French and French-speaking Belgian companies favour one-to-one interviews whereas Australian, British and German companies tend towards multiple interviewer selection interviews (Di Milia et al., 1994; Shackleton & Newell, 1994). However, that said, the findings are far from conclusive and it is unclear how companies use interviews (and other selection methods) in combination (Shackleton & Newell, 1994).

These quantitative surveys have been very helpful in directing research attention towards the most influential selection methods. In addition, they have confirmed much anecdotal data suggesting that the selection techniques of poor predictive validity still dominate managerial selection. As is the nature of all good research, the studies raise more questions than they answer. From a descriptive point of view it would be interesting to explore the other side of the equation. We have some idea of the identity of those making decisions, but we know little about the identity of applicants. This is an interesting avenue of enquiry as so much of the recruitment and selection literature assumes that assessment is by the organisation of applicants from outside the organisation. In addition, it would be useful to understand more about the reasons why people apply for jobs as this may have some bearing on how well they perform during selection (Herriot, 1989).

The present study complements existing knowledge by providing data on some of the issues raised in the original studies. It uses the technique of storytelling to gather qualitative data about the experiences of people involved in managerial selection in the UK. The current study also adds to our knowledge by nature of its exploratory design. Most previous surveys have been limited to questions and items developed by the researchers in response to current issues in the literature. This is how it should be. But occasionally it is important for management researchers to check that their interests accord with the issues on the ground.

Smith and Abrahamsen's paradox, for example, can be viewed as such a disjunction between theory and practice. This study seeks to turn the tables and to give those on the receiving end the opportunity to give their side of the story. What are their concerns? What stops them from fully implementing best practice? How do they view scholarly prescription?

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The participants were students studying for their Professional Certificate in Management at the Open University in the UK via modular (a six-month managing people course) and integrated (a twelve-month course including marketing, finance and information as well as managing people) routes. The Open University is by far the largest supplier of this qualification in the UK and it draws its students from a broad cross-section of British industry. This avoids one of the weaknesses of previous studies, namely that managerial selection surveys have focused on larger companies (Iles, 1994). The method of study delivery is through supported distance learning and 99% of the population are known to be in employment; 77% of which are employed as managers. The courses are targeted at line managers and those people who aspire to a management role. People take the courses from both functional and generalist backgrounds. Generally speaking, these students are practising managers working in a broad cross-section of organisations who study at home in the evenings and weekends.

Instructions

During the courses, the managers write between four and seven assignments. Most of these tend to be on a separate management subject such as change, leadership, and decision-making. These assignments adopt a reflective learning structure. This means that students 'reflect' upon events, experiences, discussions etc., analyse them using course ideas, and draw some practical managerial implications. For two years on these courses, one of the assignments centred on the subject of recruitment and selection. Students were asked to relate a 'story' that has taught them a lot about recruitment and selection, 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.

An adapted form of Fineman and Gabriel's (1996) prompt was used to elicit the stories. It was adapted to focus on recruitment and selection episodes rather than insights into an organisation's culture. The adapted prompt was as follows:

Try to recall an incident, event, or conversation (or series of incidents, events or conversations) that captures or symbolises an important aspect of recruitment and selection. Describe and discuss such an incident. Discuss your feelings, thoughts and emotions at the time of the incident and now, as you look back at it.

In the preamble to the task, students were asked to 'think back to a memorable recruitment and selection experience. This might be as an interviewer, a candidate, an interviewee, a test taker, a test administrator, a trainer of interviewers, an HR manager

responsible for recruitment and selection policies, a consultant, or in any other role related to recruitment or selection.’ In this way the present study was able to gather data from both sides of the engagement (applicants and selectors). Herriot and Anderson (1997) suggest that one of the greatest weaknesses of personnel selection research is that it focuses on either those people making the selection decision or those being selected. In doing so, there is a danger that the interaction between the two parties is underplayed or ignored. Whilst it is a weakness of this survey that it does not knowingly have stories from both sides of the same engagements, it does have the strength that it incorporates multiple perspectives at the same point in time in similar organisations.

Participation

Over the two-year period, about 4,000 students took the courses that included this recruitment storytelling assignment. Of these, 268 students submitted a story for inclusion in the study. One student supplied four short stories, all of which have been included in the study. It is impossible to be precise on the submission rate as this assignment was offered as a choice on one of the courses, and no records are kept on the distribution. However, the course team responsible for this course monitors the performance of tutors for the quality and standardisation of marking and feedback. About 15% of scripts are reviewed in this way. This monitoring sample suggests that about one third of students chose to tackle this assignment. Based on this percentage, the submission rate can be estimated at around 20%. The gender breakdown was 56% male and 44% female, which mirrors the overall pattern on these courses. It was not possible to ascertain the gender of 27 students who submitted stories.

Filters

Before analysis could commence, the stories were filtered to remove those that were unsuitable. First, some stories were excluded from the study because they seemed to be written to fit in with the course content, rather than as a record of experience. For example, one student described an interview in which the interviewer’s face was silhouetted against a window, the seating arrangement, and administrative difficulties. All of these matters are covered in depth in the courses and it seems probable that the content was chosen to fit in with the needs of writing the assignment. Eighteen stories (6.6%) fell into this category and were excluded. A further eight submissions (3.0%) were excluded because a story could not be identified or because the story could not be understood. In total, therefore, of the 271 stories submitted by 268 students, 245 (90.4%) stories were included in the study.

Multiple perspectives

The perspectives of the storytellers can be found in table 1. This shows that 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. It was possible to ascertain the background of 100 of these applicants. 36 people were internal applicants and 64 applied from outside the recruiting organisation. Unexpectedly, 12 of the stories were told from the perspective of a third party. Examples of these are the story of a colleague of an internal applicant and the story of a director who observed the impact of another director’s selection. Four of the stories could not be categorised.

	Occurrence
Selectors	123
Applicants	106
Third parties	12
Uncategorisable	4

Table 1 *Storytellers' perspectives*

Analysis of stories

Whilst a storytelling study of managerial selection can capture the experiences that have most impact on the people involved in such events, there are considerable problems drawing conclusions from stories. A story contains the storyteller's own experience, which may not be relevant to anyone, or anything, else. Moreover, each retelling of a story changes and shifts the emphasis (Gabriel, 2000) and every person who hears a story will interpret it differently depending on their own experience (Fineman & Gabriel, 1996). Hence, it is not possible to say that a story, or collection of stories, represents any factual truth. As a result, it might be thought that storytelling offers little opportunity to increase our understanding of recruitment and selection practices. However, I should like to argue that it is possible to gather 'objective' data from these stories. Although the quantity and quality of objective data is limited due to the subjectivity of the content of stories, some 'facts' can be found. An illustration of this can be found from an analysis of the four accounts told to Gabriel (2000) about the explosion of a fire extinguisher. These accounts range from a chronicle of the events from a manager's perspective to the fantasy of a computer operator who was almost injured by the explosion. Despite the breadth and variety of these narratives, one piece of data is retrievable from all four: a fire extinguisher exploded in an office environment. In a similar fashion, some data is retrievable from stories of recruitment and selection. One piece of quantitative data that was retrievable from these stories was the background of applicants (i.e. whether they are employed by the recruiting organisation or not).

As there are some common threads in many of the stories, a second form of objective data that can be captured is thematic data. Unfortunately, in a journal article it is not possible to repeat many stories in full and let the reader form their own interpretation. Some analysis and summarising has to take place. Given the selective content of stories, it is inappropriate to treat the stories as a complete picture of recruitment and selection practice. Instead, in analysing the stories I have looked for themes that appear to be important from the storyteller's perspective. In taking this approach, I hope to capture a snapshot of key issues that inform us of peoples' experience of recruitment and selection in the UK at the end of the twentieth century.

FINDINGS

Internal versus external applicants

Quantitative data on the source of applicants was obtained from an analysis of selectors' stories. It was not possible to gain reasonably accurate data from applicants' stories because it was often apparent that the applicants did not mention the source of other applicants. Selectors, on the other hand, usually supplied enough data to give strong hints at the source of applicants. The sources of applicants in the stories of selectors are described in Table 2.

Composition	Occurrence	Percentage
Internal applicants only	20	16.2%
External applicants only	59	48.0%
Both internal and external applicants	40	32.5%
Uncategorisable	4	3.3%

Table 2 *Composition of the applicant pools*

Several aspects of this data warrant comment. First, the source of applicants was not identifiable in just four of the selector's stories. This seems a very low figure, especially given that the students' courses make no mention whatsoever of the internal and external split of applicants. It seems that selectors see the source of applicants as something worthy of note; perhaps as an important division that is key to the telling of their recruitment and selection stories. The second aspect of these figures that prompts comment is the substantial nature of all three categories. Whilst this percentage split cannot be taken as typical of recruitment practice in Britain, – the study was not designed as a reliable survey of this question – it does suggest that each of the three categories are commonly found.

Most recruitment and selection textbooks work from the premiss that selection is by the organisation of external candidates (e.g. Cook 1998; Cooper & Robertson, 1995; Gatewood & Feild, 1994). Whilst these authors recognise that there are important differences between internal and external applicants, most suggest that internal candidates should be treated as if they were external applicants. For example, in the introduction to their textbook, Gatewood and Feild (1994) assert that, as there are usually more applicants than positions available, the assessment of internal applicants is conceptually the same as for external applicants. 'Therefore, it is necessary to collect information about the job-related skills of the applicants and identify those individuals with the best skills. Logically, the accuracy of internal movement decisions will increase if more information is collected. (pp. 4-5)' They argue that it is detrimental to the organisation not to treat internal candidates in a similar way to applicants applying for their initial job with the organisation, i.e. external candidates. Further, they contend that basing promotion and transfer decisions on factors such as 'seniority, non-systematic opinions of others in the organisation, and ill-defined reputations (p. 5)' is selection without any evaluation of the applicant's job-related qualifications.

In contrast, Heneman, Judge and Heneman (2000) have separate chapters for internal recruitment, external recruitment, internal selection, and external selection. They note that internal recruitment has additional considerations over external recruitment. These include the different approaches of open, closed and targeted recruitment, the use of job posting and nominations, and issues of succession planning. Selection methods that are more usually suited to internal rather than external applicants include peer assessments, self-assessments, job knowledge tests, managerial sponsorship, and informal discussions and recommendations. Much less is known about the validity and reliability of these methods than those used for external selection (Heneman et al., 2000), and little is known about their prevalence. Heneman et al. (2000) do not explain how a selector might combine the recruitment and selection methods when there is a mix of internal and external applicants. This is an important omission because organisations are increasingly 'externally-benchmarking' internal appointments. This is particularly the case of not-for-profit and public organisations who see the external benchmarking as a way of giving legitimacy to appointments and checking the quality of staff (Harris, 2000).

The combination of internal and external applicants can create dilemmas for the selector. For example, Harris (2000) reports the recruitment and selection processes used in a British City Council. She reports that the work records of internal applicants were not taken into

account when the final selection decision was made. Although such an approach is designed to maximise procedural justice, the internal candidates found it most unfair. ‘Such prior knowledge was held to be disadvantaging external candidates so the final decision rested entirely upon interview performance to ensure uniformity of treatment, a principle that clearly rankled with the internal candidates’ (p. 40). Similar stories were told by internal applicants in the current sample. For example, Farideh tells of her annoyance of being treated in this way,

“I did not mind so much about the interview itself, but I found the test a bit of an insult. I had already gone through the testing stage during my trial period and the M.D. praised my work and said that she was very pleased with my performance and that the test was just a formality. [...] During the test the same thoughts were going through my mind. I had already gone through all these tests and the M.D. is fully aware of my competence and capabilities.”

Farideh was offered the job. But she was so disappointed by the way she was treated during this recruitment and selection exercise that she rejected the offer of the job and found work elsewhere.

External applicants have a different perspective on the ‘metaphorical level playing field’ (Webb, 1997, p. 160) approach to selection in which selectors try to treat every applicant in an identical fashion. Rather than worry about being treated in a similar fashion, their concern is that decisions have already been made in favour of internal applicants. There were many examples of this view in the stories. An anonymous external candidate who failed to get the job described an incident he noticed whilst leaving the premises:

I noticed that the interviewer had come out of the room and warmly greeted the remaining candidates. It seemed to me that they were old colleagues and knew each other very well. I thought, ‘Oh well, jobs for boys’.

This external candidate failed to get the job, which was at a major supplier, and instead it went to an internal candidate. He felt it was a ‘done deal’ and that his application was a waste of time. Such opinions surfaced several times. Lynne was interviewed by a non-profit organisation:

At the end of the interview I felt that the decision had been made before I was interviewed. I did not feel I had had a fair opportunity to show my skills and experience. My overall impression was that I had been invited to interview to make up the numbers, and that the job was already earmarked for an internal candidate.

These examples are typical of the views of external applicants who failed to be offered the jobs they applied to. It would be interesting to know whether or not these types of views are general impressions held by external applicants entering selection competitions against internal applicants or whether they are post-event rationalisations designed to shift the reason for failure from themselves to the circumstances they found themselves in. It would also be interesting to explore whether or not these perceptions are accurate. Are internal applicants pre-judged (positively or negatively) before selection events? Is their fate pre-determined? What factors influence such judgements? Unfortunately the current study cannot answer these questions; it merely surfaces the concerns of those on the receiving end of recruitment and selection. However, the applicants’ views in this exploratory study suggest considerable

unease with the level playing field approach to selection from those being assessed. Interestingly, the views of those people making the selection decisions also demonstrate some unease with the approach. Margaret was the member of an interview panel for a secretary:

An external candidate – who had been recommended by the incumbent – was recruited while [another] candidate who was an internal candidate and more qualified was rejected. This was the result of how both candidates presented themselves during the interview. [... The internal candidate] had over 10 years' secretarial experience and was familiar with the organisational policies, but did not respond convincingly to the questioning. [...] I knew [the internal] candidate could do the job although she failed to convince the panel while I was doubtful about [the external] candidate.

Of course, Margaret's opinion about the qualities of two candidates might be incorrect and her story might stem from disappointment that a friend failed to get the job. However, such stories appeared time and time again. It seems that both selectors and applicants know that the creation of a level playing field is unattainable. Selectors realise the impracticality and foolishness of denying themselves valuable information about people. Internal applicants believe it is unfair for their work records to be excluded from the selection process and external applicants believe they are at a disadvantage to internal candidates regardless. Whilst these concerns might just be dismissed as perceptual differences, they appear to have practical ramifications: the selector who ignores interview performance and relies on his own subjective assessment of someone at work; the internal applicant who leaves the company; and the external applicant who loses respect for a major supplier. These stories seem to suggest that the people on the receiving end of recruitment and selection believe it is impossible to treat every applicant in the same way. More than this though, the impression is formed that these people do not think it is right to treat every applicant in the same way.

Impact of failure on internal applicants

Many of the submitted stories illustrate the impact of failure on internal applicants. For example, Kathyne says that she:

did not feel that the person who had been given the position had the same amount of experience as myself and I felt cheated out of the position. Upon returning to my job, I did not see the point in doing any extra activities. Doing all the extra hours and work did not get me anywhere.

Joe describes his reaction at failing to gain a promotion through in a competitive process thus:

My emotions now are still of some unresolved anger and of a wasted opportunity. I was not offered the post and the experience weakened my relationship with my employer, influencing a subsequent move to another organisation.

Another manager failed to gain an internal position that would have been a promotion to her. Instead a colleague was successful:

I found out that one of my colleagues had the job. She was very happy and

everyone was congratulating her. I was sitting there in silence. It was not my colleague's fault. She had every right to be happy on her success. [...] I was thinking if the management wanted to appoint her, why did they have to go through the pressure of job advertising, shortlisting and interviewing.

Later in this story, the manager described her depression, anger towards the company, and deterioration in health that led to her having to take six weeks off work.

The developing applicant reaction literature is giving us some insight into the ways in which recruitment and selection affects external applicants (Barber, 1998), but we have very little data on the ways in which recruitment and selection affects internal applicants. Heneman et al (2000) describe this as 'a glaring omission' (p. 349). Intuitively, the impact of recruitment and selection practices on internal candidates seems especially important as those that fail are usually still employed by the organisation and they will take any altered attitudes or behaviours to work with them. They get to see the performance of the people who were selected instead of them. And, when procedural justice has been high, internal applicants have the discouragement of knowing that it is their own failings that have caused them to be unsuccessful (Brockner, 2001).

	Occurrence
Internal applicants	
Promotion	26
Desire to relocate	3
Wanted permanent work	2
Development	1
Relocation of partner	1
Invited to apply	1
Merger – applied for own job	1
Couldn't say/doesn't say	1
External applicants	
First job	12
Wanted new employer – dissatisfaction/frustration etc	9
Redundant/unemployed	7
Headhunted/approached	4
Wanted different type of work	4
Promotion/advancement	3
Relocation	2
Reorganisation meant job disappeared	2
Wanted permanent work	1
Return from maturity leave	1
Break back into management	1
Couldn't say/doesn't say	18

Table 3 *Primary reasons given for application*

Differences between internal and external applicants

In reading these stories I became aware of how different internal and external applicants are. There are some obvious differences. By definition, external applicants do not work for the organisation. Consequently, little is known about them, and everything they say might be a

falsehood. In contrast, organisations should possess a lot of objective data on internal applicants' work performance, skills, knowledge, behaviour, attitudes, demeanour, motivation, extra-role behaviours, person–organisation fit, ability to get on with people they work with, and so forth. From these stories, I found that employees expect their employers to have this information and to use it appropriately. External applicants also expect this to be happening. Beyond these obvious differences, these stories highlighted more subtle differences.

The stories that are told from applicants' perspective usually informed me of the reasons why the person had chosen to apply for the position. This data is displayed in Table 3 below and internal and external applicants' reasons for applying are separated out.

The data in table 3 demonstrates that, by and large, internal applicants apply for reasons of promotion or advancement. The reasons given by external applicants are more varied. External applicants 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. As a result, 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. Peter's story illustrates this:

I felt sure I would be offered a position and salary that would reflect my background, experience and knowledge of the project engineering industry. I had been employed as a Lead Mechanical Engineer some ten years previously and had continued to rise successfully up the career ladder since then. [But] I was being offered a position at least four levels below my last position in South Africa.

Peter left this job only ten months later and went on to better things. In such situations of over qualified application, the focus of selectors is likely to concentrate on assessing how well the applicant will 'fit in'; i.e. how well will the experienced and skilled applicant be able to survive and thrive in the new environment? Interestingly, the stories suggest that selector's emphasis on assessing external applicants' ability to 'fit in' is not limited to candidates who are over qualified. Clare's story illustrates this emphasis:

[The M.D. ...] said he thought I would be perfect for the job but just to make sure he wanted me to join them for a one-day trial period. I was very surprised about this as I had never heard of anyone being asked to do this. My initial thought was 'is this his way of getting some work done without having to pay for a temp?' He then explained that as [the company] was a franchise and not a large company he had to 'ensure that all potential employees would fit in with the rest of the team'.

Clare was offered this job and happily accepted it; just as the organisation knew that the existing staff would get on with her, she knew she would get on with her new colleagues. She was given the opportunity to explore how well she would fit with the existing employees and the organisation, and vice versa.

This is a contrast to the assessment of internal applicants. With this type of applicants, selectors know how well they 'fit in'. Robert, a manager in a utility, described one shortlisted applicant who was returning from maternity leave thus:

She is well known in [the organisation] for being charmless, aggressive, a

malicious gossip, and dismissive of junior colleagues. [...] She gave a perfect interview. The only problem was that she was talking to an audience that knew her. [...] But if she had been an external candidate we would not have learnt that just from the interview and we would almost certainly have offered her the post.

As a result, assessors of internal applicants are likely to place more emphasis 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.

The fit literature provides a language by which the differences between internal and external applicants can be described. Whereas selectors know nothing of how external applicants will fit current employees (person–people fit, P–P fit) and the organisation (person–organisation fit, P–O fit), the selectors can make these assessments of internal applicants (see Robert's story above). Unfortunately, the P–O fit literature is very theoretical and offers little in the way of advice to practitioners, and the P–P fit literature is in its infancy. And yet, as these stories illustrate, these forms of fit are of as much importance to selectors as person–job fit (P–J fit).

Market forces

By and large, those managers who wrote from the perspective of the selector gave the impression that they were selectors who appreciated the importance of recruitment and selection and were prepared to work hard to do the best possible job. However, two factors were repeatedly mentioned that limited their success as selectors. These two factors were interviewer fear associated with poor training, and market forces. The first of these might be expected. The storytellers had chosen, after all, to study a management course that would, amongst other things, improve their recruitment and selection skills. The second factor, market forces, was not mentioned in the course and has received very little attention in the recruitment and selection literature.

The selectors reported two problems associated with market forces: too many applicants and too few. Thomas was charged with opening a new manufacturing site in an economically deprived part of Scotland. He describes his reaction at receiving over 2200 replies to a single advertisement:

As I sat looking through the applications what struck home was that these were 'real' people and I would be responsible for some of them returning to work, in one case after 18 months of job searching. I agonised for hours reading the CVs and covering letters, and in truth let my personal feelings get in the way of my professional responsibilities, which was why I asked another manager to assist in the shortlisting process.

Sadly, not all cases of applicant oversupply were greeted with as much compassion. Kevin received 200 replies to an advertisement, which he was able to whittle down to 30.

Interviewing such a number was obviously impractical so the manager and I just relied on the overall impression given by the application itself to invite four for interview.

Other managers opted for a different approach and decided to interview thirty or more

applicants. Overall though, these stories revealed that selectors had very little science to help them shortlist; in almost every case the shortlisting was conducted subjectively. Standard application forms and CVs were used more for apparent administrative convenience, but were of little help when it came to choosing whom to take to the next stage of selection. There were no accounts of custom-made application forms that might probe for information related to the selection criteria, nor was there any mention of online application processes that include some selection devices. Instead, shortlisting appeared a haphazard process dominated by the selector's search for a few headlines such as current job title and qualifications.

There were many more examples of applicant undersupply than applicant oversupply, which possibly reflects reflecting the economic prosperity of much of the United Kingdom at the time of the survey. Sometimes the applicant undersupply was so severe that employers resorted to employing anyone remotely qualified who applied for the position. Andrew's story concerns his difficulty finding qualified staff to run a prison hospital. He offered jobs to all eight applicants and only three accepted. Of these, two left within three months.

Other people in the organisation began to joke and jibe at the health care centre's expense as 'The place where nobody wanted to work'. This demoralised the health care staff and strained the already fragile relationship we had with the main prison. The strange thing was that the department was still allowed to run with huge staff shortages, which at times was unsafe, and this adversely affected the staff's morale and health.

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. Adrian says,

I can say I had strong reservations about the job after the interview, but accepted it because my wife was due to give birth to our second child and I needed an income to support my family.

Adrian was proved right. He found the job 'awful' and soon left. This sort of story was common. 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. For example, Alexa had been told by her interviewer that the organisation was a growing and dynamic one that believes in open communication and valuing people's opinions. This made her feel as if she really wanted to work at the organisation. She accepted the job, but quickly became disillusioned.

When I asked my Sales Director to explain what promotion prospects there are, he replied 'I said there would be an opportunity for promotion because I was hoping the organisation would grow and eventually there would be an opportunity'. This has made me feel I was deliberately lied to in the interview.

One might be tempted to say, 'caveat emptor'. But such is the power of corporate interviewers in many situations that applicants fear that critical questioning or investigation is likely to rule them out of consideration. This is something they cannot risk. But at other times, such as when there are considerable skill shortages, the tide changes completely and it becomes a seller's market. Oliver investigated an opening as an engineer at one of his own

company's few competitors:

The Personnel Director based himself in a hotel for several days in the town of the company's main rival. Advertisements were placed in the local paper for drop-in, informal interviews. [...After I said I wasn't interested in the post,] his attitude seemed to change dramatically and he seemed to be trying to persuade me to make an application.

Lorraine describes how she was headhunted to a senior position in a local council. She was approached by the Chief Executive Officer and told that she was wanted by the organisation and that they would create a suitable post for her, made promises about future promotions, and offered her a very attractive salary. She accepted the job, but adds,

I have been made a lot of promises and a consequence of this may be that if the job doesn't live up to my expectations I may want to move on again.

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. In many professional sports, in the literary world, and in many other 'glamour' industries, the recruiter is not even able to meet the actual candidate and instead has to work through an agent or other form of intermediary. Lorraine's story illustrates that such applicant power is not confined to the glamour industries, but has made excursions into the recruitment of senior managers. In such situations the traditional paradigm of systematic personnel selection (Smith & Robertson, 1993) becomes compromised with the selector largely neutered by the applicant's power. Interestingly though, much personnel selection research, with the notable exception of the applicant reactions literature, is conducted in environments free from the market dynamics described on the past few pages. There are significant literatures on labour forces, market forces, and economic conditions, but as yet these have not been fully integrated into the recruitment and selection literature. Perhaps the proliferation of references to market forces in these stories suggests that it might be time to do so.

Interviews

Not surprisingly, the most commonly occurring theme in the stories is of poor interviewing. These range from the bizarre

My dental surgery was not the ideal place to conduct an interview. The candidate had to sit on the dental chair whilst, due to the layout of the room, I was forced to sit behind the dental chair. This, I felt, did not help put the interviewee at ease.

through the unpleasant

He looked out the window and picked his nose.

and the rude

He then took a phone call with not so much as an 'excuse me please'. By this time I was fully convinced that I had completely wasted my time in travelling down, that he had no intention of even considering me for the

position and that he had no thought for anyone else's feelings. I was deep down very angry.

to the unlawful

[I was asked whether] I would like to work for a woman who enjoys making men cry.

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; the managers were, after all, asked to recall their most memorable experience of recruitment and selection. 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 afraid to express themselves and to ask the questions that they would like to. Paul expresses this fear:

The day arrived and I was more anxious than any of the candidates. What if my questions were not appropriate? What if I gave the wrong impression? And I was going to be their boss.

Later in the story Paul explained that his lack of confidence stemmed from not being trained to interview and not having any experience in the role. But several interviewers who had received training reported greater fears than before. Their 'fair selection' courses had left them with the impression that they must ask everyone exactly the same questions, that they must not deviate from the script, and that they must not tell rejected applicants the reasons for their failure. To do otherwise would result in possible legal action. A couple of interviewers report being 'paralysed' by such training.

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 be sticking to the schedule, the accuracy of directions, the receptionist's knowledge of arrivals, an appropriate waiting area, being offered refreshments on arrival, or having expenses paid, applicants pay incredible attention to detail as the following extract illustrates.

The interview invitation had no location map. On ringing to request one, staff were surprised I did not know where it was – it was a building in an industrial estate in another city. [...] The interview started 50 minutes late, with no explanation other than a terse 'they're running a bit late' from the receptionist on arrival. I waited on a chair in the busy reception area. No refreshments were offered. [...] My overall impression was that I had been invited to interview to make up numbers and that the job had already been earmarked for an internal candidate. After two days I was told the post had indeed been offered to an internal candidate. I was not surprised, but was annoyed about the time that my research, preparation and interview had taken and that I had been treated so discourteously. It took five weeks of chasing before the expenses I had been offered arrived, which compounded

the sense of grievance. I was offered feedback, but the person responsible did not return my three phone calls.

Ryan and Ployhart (2000) summarise the applicant reactions literature. They divide it into three distinct streams. The first stream is an examination of how the various components of selection processes influence the attractiveness of an organisation to applicants. The second stream centres on social justice theory and how applicants form their impressions of fairness during selection. The third stream examines differences in the perceptions of selection processes between majority and minority group members. The stories collected in this survey only occasionally referred to these matters. Perhaps this was due to the almost universal adoption of the interview as the method of selection. It was the 'accepted' method of selection that all applicants expected to experience. Occasionally other selection methods were used, but when they were, few opinions were offered about their inclusion. Only when internal applicants complained about being judged in the same way as external applicants, did the issue of social justice and reactions to the choice of selection methods raise its head. Instead, it was the poor administrative detail (in addition to interviewer rudeness and poor preparation) that attracted both comment and decisions not to continue with the application. 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.

I decided that I would not want to work for a company so disorganised and unfocussed.

Silences

Having discussed the themes that emerged within the stories, it is interesting to pause for a moment and consider the things that were not included in the stories. The traditional paradigm of recruitment and selection (McCourt, 1999), which underpins almost all systematic approaches, begins with a job analysis. This is the crucial first stage of the process from which everything else is created – job descriptions, person specifications, selection criteria, even content for job advertisements and guidance for the choice of selection techniques. Failures in job analysis should, it has been argued, snowball through the recruitment and selection process creating error and poor decision-making (e.g. Billsberry, 2000). This rational approach to recruitment and selection is pretty much universal in the literature. As a result, we might expect to see many references to job analysis in the stories of selectors. But, only two of the stories included any discussion of job analysis, and these were fairly perfunctory. Job descriptions were mentioned a little more frequently. But every mention was to existing documents that are usually kept secure in the Human Resources or Personnel department. There is little discussion about updating and checking their content, and no discussion concerning the creation of job descriptions. In addition, there were no mentions at all of KSAOs, selection method reliability, or validity studies. It seems that the storytellers were either unaware of the scientific paradigm of recruitment and selection (e.g. McCourt, 1999; Smith & Robertson, 1993), or have decided to adopt a different approach that owes less to science and more to custom and tradition. Sadly, these stories do not appear to explain why this is the case, just that the scientific paradigm is largely ignored by organisational recruiters.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to capture and explore the experience of people involved in contemporary managerial selection so that we might enrich our understanding of current practice. At the start of this paper I said that occasionally it is important for management researchers to check that their interests accord with the issues on the ground. This study gave those on the receiving end the opportunity to put across their concerns.

One of the main themes that storytellers voice centres on occasions when internal and external applicants compete for the same job. In about one third of selection episodes related, this was the case. Both groups of applicants voice worries about such competition. Generally speaking, external applicants believe that they are not competing on a level playing field, whereas internal applicants feel their commitment to their employers and their past performance is disregarded, which they deem unfair. To date, the recruitment and selection literature has largely ignored the dimension of applicant background. Instead, most writers argue that every applicant should be dealt with in a similar manner. Such was the strength of feeling in these stories on this matter, that it seems that some analysis of this simple prescription is required. There are many avenues for future research here. First of all, it seems important to look at whether or not selectors do actually prejudge internal applicants, as external applicants believe they do. Conversely, do selectors ignore everything about internal applicants' past performance except that which is introduced during the selection process, as internal applicants believe? If selectors do these things, how do they do them? It also seems worthwhile looking at the 'level playing field'. What are the positive and negative aspects of level playing field? Is it possible to create such an environment?

As previous studies have shown (e.g. Bowen, Ledford & Nathan, 1991; Rynes & Gerhart, 1990), selectors are keen to assess applicants, especially external applicants, for their fit to the organisation, its employees, as well as to the KSAOs required to do the job. In addition, applicants want to work somewhere where they will 'fit in'. The selectors in this sample attempted to do this assessment with interview questions, by arranging for external applicants to spend some time in the organisation, and by drawing upon their prior knowledge of internal applicants. There is nothing else selectors can turn to. The data from this survey therefore supports the calls of others (e.g. Karren & Graves 1994) for practical methods to help selectors assess applicants' fit to the organisation, its values, and future colleagues.

The third theme that ran through these stories was the influence of market forces in shaping recruitment and selection processes, decisions, and the balance of power between selector and applicant ('buyer' and 'seller'). These forces can be so powerful that all reasonable practical advice (e.g. shortlist based on the selection criteria, try to include some form of work test in addition to an interview) goes 'out of the window'. Recruiters can be so deluged that selection (initial selection at least) becomes a lottery. Or recruiters can find that applicants are so sparse that they will take any one with only the most cursory nod to selection. Some further analysis of these extreme situations seems warranted. What can selectors do in these situations? What should selectors do in these situations? In the UK at the end of the twentieth century, sparse applicant fields were much more common than plentiful applicant fields due to relatively low unemployment rates. This survey demonstrated that a small number of 'high demand' applicants are taking advantage of these conditions and dictating to organisations the form of recruitment and selection episodes and subsequent terms and conditions, thereby challenging much received wisdom on recruitment and selection. As yet there has been very little research in this area. Further research is required to explore the conditions in which the balance of power shifts from recruiter to applicant and the ramifications of this switch of power.

Other themes raised in the stories include the importance of detail, especially administrative detail, and examples of poor interviewing. Interviewing has dominated the selection literature for the past one hundred years, and its appearance in these stories comes as no surprise. However, it did not dominate these stories in the way that might have been predicted, which suggests that extremely poor interviewing may, by and large, be a thing of the past. The issue of administrative detail, on the other hand, is one of those 'Cinderella' subjects that is mentioned in every textbook, but which has attracted very little research attention. Of course, the selector must attend to the detail and ensure that people are treated appropriately, but is it a subject worthy of research? The stories in this survey suggest that this Cinderella subject is more important to applicants than we might naturally assume. Applicants are keenly attentive to anything that might signal what it will be like working in the recruiting organisation. By association, an organisation that cannot treat applicants right is unlikely to treat employees right. This simple logic was voiced on a number of occasions and seems to have been the major reason for some applicants to abandon their application. In conditions of low unemployment and scarce skills and resources, it is especially important that we find out more about the impact of administrative detail on applicants.

The final theme that this study considered was the silences. These silences were loud, as the storytellers omitted virtually all mention of job analysis, KSAOs, selection criteria, and reliability and validity studies. Moreover, the storytellers conveyed the impression that these aspects of selection were absent from their selection process. This is important because these aspects are the crucial episodes in a rational and scientific approach to recruitment and selection. Without these processes, selection becomes a subjective intervention, as there is nothing scientific to guide selectors and little attempt to monitor the process. Further research is needed to find out the reasons why selectors side step these processes and the implications of them doing so.

In summary, the subjects that recruiters and applicants want to talk about are the problems associated with a mix of internal and external applicants, the problems associated with assessing team and organisational fit, the problems associated with market forces, and problems associated with the administrative detail of the process. All of these issues receive relatively minor attention in the literature. Only when it came to the conduct of selection interviews did the interests of practitioners and researchers converge. Perhaps this is the primary finding of this survey, which echoes Smith and Abrahamsen's paradox; there is a significant separation between the concerns of those on the receiving end and the concerns of the research community. The overall impression that I came away with was the feeling that recruiters struggle with the process that the trainers and researchers advocate. At best, selectors create the impression of science (a process they can justify to the outside world if needs be) by picking and choosing the parts of the process that seem useful. But when they have to make selection decisions about whom to shortlist or employ, they have to rely on their instincts, judgement, and 'gut feel'. In essence, my reading of these stories is of selectors who unknowingly disguise subjective processes and judgements with a veneer of pseudo-science. Most selectors want to do a good and fair job and they are willing to invest the time, effort and training to make it happen. But when it comes to the practical implementation of the process, something stops them from operating a fully objective process with job analysis, selection criteria, and studies of reliability and validity. Due to the storytellers' silence on these subjects, it was not possible to gain much insight into the reasons why these processes are avoided. Further research that examines the reasons why selectors do not implement these processes, assuming that they indeed do not get implemented, would be particularly valuable. Such research might help us, as researchers, to design an objective process that selectors can implement more easily.

Overall, I found these stories entertaining, shocking, saddening, and humorous. Most of

the storytellers have managed to convey their own emotions about how they felt about their most memorable recruitment and selection experience. In this paper I have related some of the main themes from the stories that appear to illustrate current and emergent issues in the literature. In particular, the plight of the internal applicant kept raising its head and, according to these storytellers, would appear to be the most pressing issue facing contemporary recruiters.

Thinking about the stories as a whole, I am struck by the sense of frustration in them. In particular, interviewers are frustrated that they cannot form a real understanding of what applicants are like; their strengths and weaknesses, their passions, their skills, and their interpersonal behaviour. Moreover, there appears to be an acceptance that they have to adopt selection procedures that they do not believe will work. Their Personnel Department tells them to do job analysis, to write job descriptions, to develop selection criteria, but when it comes to the actual event, they are unable to perform in such a coldly rational fashion that excludes everything except the selection criteria. Selectors are influenced by past experience with an internal candidate, they are influenced by subtle unconscious interactions with an interviewee, and they have their own interpretation of the job and what is required to do it. Perhaps now is the time to examine our selection paradigm to take account of these issues and help the selector manage them effectively and fairly.

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