

**MONASH UNIVERSITY
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**A PSYCHODYNAMIC PERSPECTIVE
OF ELECTRONIC SELECTION AND
RECRUITMENT *OR* DOES
MONSTER.COM BYTE?**

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Abstract

Over recent years on-line recruiting which uses the spread and access of the World Wide Web (WWW) or Internet has become increasingly popular for recruitment agencies, job-seekers and organisations alike (e.g. Starcke, 1996; Wyld, 1998; Kay, 2000). Exponents of electronic recruiting claim it has changed the way the recruiting industry works and that it is faster, more efficient and cheaper than traditional methods (e.g. Browne, 1998; Useem, 1999; Stellar Services Home Page, 2000; Kay, 2000; topjobs.com.au, 2000).

Despite the hyperbole¹ that surrounds the unlimited and unbounded potential of the Web I will argue in this paper rather than representing a paradigmatic transformation, the practise of electronic recruitment is little more than a linguistic shift from recruitment to e-cruitment. The essence of selection and recruitment is unchanged – the requirement for an employee is identified either because of a vacancy or the creation of a new position. There is then a search for a suitable applicant; one or more persons are considered for the position, some process of evaluation is conducted and an applicant is selected followed by the notification of unsuccessful applicants. Electronic recruitment has enabled all these steps in the process to be conducted electronically, usually through the Internet.

Baffled by the excitement and claims of electronic recruiters the author has attempted some analysis of selection and recruitment from the psychodynamic perspective. Having identified significant conscious and unconscious anxieties generated by the processes of selection and recruitment, discussion is then provided on the creation of social defenses in response to these considerable anxieties. It is from this context the willingness of recruiters to utilise the new technologies can be understood.

Without challenging the efficiency of on-line recruitment, and there are some who do (Armes, 1999; HRFocus, 2000) what appears to have changed dramatically is the creation of a new dynamic between recruiter and potential recruit. It will be argued the ready acceptance of on-line recruitment is not just because of anticipated efficiencies but because the newly created dynamic made possible by the innovation of the Internet provides an extremely effective technological tool for recruiters to defend against the anxieties generated by the process of selection and recruitment.

¹ For example the banner of a flyer for a two-day conference in November, 1999 on on-line recruitment began with *The labour market is undergoing a paradigm shift. Recruiters not exploiting the cost efficiency, speed and reach of the Internet will find their company floundering in the face of their competitors.*

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BACKGROUND

It is a truism, often challenged but nonetheless repeated, that an organisation's greatest assets are its people/employees/human resources. Irrespective of whether this is merely an organisational platitude the significance of the role people perform in organisational effectiveness cannot be challenged. For some writers the greatest source of competitive advantage stems from an organisation's human resources (Schuler and Jackson, 1987; Connor and Ulrich 1996; Ulrich, 1997). With an increased emphasis on quality, customer service, productivity, employee commitment, workforce flexibility, teamwork and so on is an even greater necessity for all organisations to attract and recruit the right person for the right job at the right time (Stone, 1998; Compton and Nankervis, 1998). This requirement for quality staff in a competitive environment has placed growing pressure on all organisations to ensure they have the capacity and capability to meet the demands of selection and recruitment.

Efficient systems are required not only to meet commercial imperatives but also to ensure the selection and recruitment process complies with employment legislation. And although the new economy operates as if there are no geographic boundaries, most organisations do continue to operate from some physical locale. The necessity for legislative compliance is therefore in addition to whatever informal local social and political demands may prevail. For instance, although within Australia equal employment, anti-discrimination and industrial relations legislation regulates all aspects of the employment relationship, there are also expectations that corporations and public sector agencies will employ targeted disadvantaged groups such as people with disabilities, indigenous Australians and so on.

The final, but not the least important consideration in the selection process is the estimated cost of selection and recruitment. The more senior the position the greater the cost, with some writers estimating the direct and indirect costs of replacing senior staff to be as great as A\$75 000 (Abbott, De Cieri and Iverson, 1998). And of course this is separate to any financial costs associated with any litigation that may occur as a result of poor selection and recruitment practise.

The process of selection is therefore not a simple task. Any appointment of staff is mediated by organisational requirements, legislative prescriptions and social and political expectations; all within the context of significant financial repercussions should inappropriate or unlawful selection practices occur.

It is clear from this perspective there is considerable scope for anxiety generated by the processes of selection and recruitment. I will argue these anxieties emanate from both the conscious and manifest concerns with the task as well as the unconscious fears that are triggered by the demands of the selection process. And it is because of these conscious and unconscious anxieties that recruiters establish rigid controls over the process. At the same time, because the consequences of a poor appointment could be so significant for the recruiter/ human resources practitioner/ manager it appears every attempt is made to minimise any personal or subjective involvement in that same process.

With so much at stake it is perhaps not surprising the process of selection and recruitment whether addressed from the perspective of Human Resources Management (Stone, 1998; Compton and Nankervis, 1998) or organisational psychology (Schein, 1980) prescribes the efficacy of rational choice and objective and scientific methods to select the right person for the right job. Sophisticated technologies and testing procedures have been designed with the intent to evaluate general ability, specific skills and personality and/or psychological profiles of applicants (Compton and Nankervis, 1998). Predicated on the need to create objective constructs of prediction and measurement, much of the recruitment literature condemns the use of non-scientific processes such as face-to-face interviews as inefficient, costly and highly subjective (Compton and Nankervis, 1998; Graves and Karren, 1996/1998).

SOCIAL DEFENSES AGAINST ORGANISATIONAL ANXIETY

There is a large body of work within organisational literature that recognises the influence personal and group psychology has on organisational life (e.g. Schein 1965; Katz and Kahn, 1978; Levinson, 1978; Hirschhorn, 1990; Diamond, 1993). For this discussion however I shall be focussing on the psychodynamic approach that emerged from the Tavistock Institute in London by researchers who examined the way in which participation in work and organisational life stimulates painful anxieties which in turn leads to the creation of powerful defensive systems within organisations. Elliot Jaques (1955) and Isobel Menzies (1970) showed that in addition to functional reasons for the establishment of various organisational systems, processes and structures these arrangements also provided organisational cohesion in the defense against shared anxieties.

In describing this process as a social defense, the concept provides a link between individual and collective anxieties and offers a way of seeing the interrelationship between the individual and the group. It is as an individual taking up a work role that particular anxieties are generated; it is in establishing systems to defend against those anxieties that social systems are created. Over time the social defense system is built up and maintained as members of the group enter unconscious agreements to diminish their task-related anxiety (Gilmore and Krantz, 1990).

Identifying the ways in which organisational members use the psychological processes of splitting, projective identification, idealisation and so on Elliot Jaques (1953/1990) provided an elegant example of how the experience of splitting and projection has institutionalised the role of a first officer aboard a ship. Any ambivalence, negative feelings, fears and doubts experienced by the crew is split off and projected onto the First Officer, whose duty is to take responsibility for everything that goes wrong. This unconscious process allows the ship's captain upon whom the crew is dependent, "to be more readily idealised and identified with as a good protective figure" (p. 426).

Yet another example is provided by Menzies (1970) in her seminal work on nursing, in which she argued considerable anxieties are generated when engaged in the tasks required of an occupation essentially about illness and death. In performing these tasks feelings of fear, disgust and distaste may emerge; just as feelings of compassion, guilt and libidinal and erotic attraction may be experienced. She showed that in an effort to defend against these anxieties, systems within hospitals were designed to limit close contact between nurses and individual patients - rosters rotated staff through different wards and shifts; rituals were introduced such as waking patients to give them drugs when sleep was more beneficial; patients were often identified not by name but by bed or illness and so on. With no particular ties to any individual patients and with no thought required to perform mindless rituals nurses were able to avoid feelings of anxieties.

Although much about nursing practise has changed since Menzies' account the use of social defenses has not. Before moving onto a discussion of how the use of on-line recruitment acts as a defense against the anxiety experienced by selection and recruitment I shall examine just a few of the psychological issues associated with selection and recruitment. For the purposes of this paper issues shall be examined only from the perspective of the recruiter and will be limited to only three issues - the myth of the perfect or idealised employee and the ways in which feelings of envy and rejection and exclusion are intrinsic to the process of selection and recruitment. Other psychological responses to the recruitment process that may emerge within applicants as well as recruiters will not be considered - word limits providing a boundary to this discussion.

The Perfect or Idealised Employee

Pressures for improved performance, growing incidence of corporate mergers and rationalisations, downsizing, global competition and so on are creating a demand for "super-employees" who have multiple skills and can work within increasingly demanding working environments (Graves and Karren, 1996). These expectations of super-employees are both difficult to achieve and highly ambiguous. For instance commentators, while noting the paradox as if an aside, identify the necessity for employees to take risks but avoid failure; know every detail of the business and delegate more responsibility; be passionate about vision and be flexible and able to change direction quickly and speak up, be a leader and be participative, listen and co-operate (Kanter, 1990).

It is apparent that no employee can fulfil these impossible (dare one say schizophrenic) expectations. Such demands create fantasies of an ideal or perfect employee and in so doing create for recruiters an impossible task. At an executive level perfection may require the skills and qualities of a superhuman saviour. And yet despite the elevation in the business press of some corporate leaders to a god-like status (e.g. Michael Eisner of Disney, Jack Welch at General Electric, Bill Gates at Microsoft) the essence of humanness is imperfection. The fantasy of the perfect employee or the leader as saviour is just that – a fantasy.

The cost of belief in finding the perfect employee can be enormous. Intrinsic to the fantasy of the perfect employee is the fear of hiring an imperfect candidate. Such a fear may (and has) paralyse/d the process of seeking the most suitable candidate, whether it be on an insistence the advertising be listed as widely as possible, that a large enough pool of candidates is available, that all selection criteria be met and so on. In this circumstance no employee can be “good enough”.

Rejection and Exclusion

Corporate down-sizing, frequent mergers and acquisitions, outsourcing of services, privatisation of government services and agencies and a sustained unemployment rate in Australia of about 8% have all contributed to a large pool of professionals seeking employment. Although not all commentators on the human cost of down-sizing see a parallel with the horrors of the Holocaust (see Stein, 1996), the psychological impact of forced redundancy can be enormous (Sparrow and Cooper, 1998; Luthans and Sommer, 1999; Grunberg, Anderson-Connolly and Greenberg, 2000).

It is this contextual factor that must be considered when making explicit the presence of rejection and exclusion within each step of the process of selection and recruitment. Because there are usually more applicants than positions available the task of informing a candidate of success is mediated by the awareness that many more applicants must be informed of their failure – that is, of their rejection. To reject is almost as unpleasant as to be rejected; responses to the feelings rejection invokes may vary – but for most are feelings of considerable anxiety. As infants we were excluded from our parents' world and every person no matter their subsequent circumstances has therefore experience of rejection and exclusion. Rejection is to deny belonging and attachment – and to belong is considered a fundamental human psychological and physiological need (Maslow, 1970; Bowlby, 1973; Klein, 1986).

For recruiters, although it is they who are engaged in the act of rejection and exclusion, it is the anxiety of their own rejection that is experienced in the act of excluding an Other. I intend to discuss later how on-line recruitment has been taken up so readily as a defense against these anxieties.

Envy

One of the rarely discussed features of organisational life, envy, can also be readily invoked during the process of conducting a search for a new employee (Bedeian, 1995; Stein, 2000). The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary suggests there are two aspects to envy – the first involves a wish to have the good fortune and/or possessions of an Other; the second involves feelings of resentment and discontent towards the more fortunate Other. Employee resumes and curriculum vitae provide significant amount of personal information that is readily accessible to all those involved in the selection process. Details of place of residence, educational achievements, career history and successes and so on can provide a very clear image (or fantasy) of the applicants perhaps highlighting individual shortcomings by the discrepancy between recruiters' own achievements and the successes of job applicants.

Although there are many ways in which envy may influence the selection process the focus of this paper is on the existence of envy invoked by the ready access to large numbers of applicant's employment histories. Envy is an extremely unpleasant emotion to experience and individual responses to envy can be very internally destructive (Klein, 1957). It is nonetheless an aspect of the selection and recruitment process that must be considered.

It is apparent involvement in selection and recruitment of staff can be a process fraught with psychological stresses. Either consciously or within their unconscious recruiters face fundamental anxieties – the anxiety of fear of failure, the anxiety of rejection and exclusion as well as the anxiety created by envy.

ON-LINE RECRUITMENT OR E(ELECTRONIC RE)CRUITMENT

Over recent years² on-line recruiting which uses the spread and access of the World Wide Web (WWW) has become increasingly popular for recruitment agencies, job-seekers and organisations alike (e.g. Starcke, 1996; Wyld, 1998; Kay, 2000). Exponents of electronic recruiting claim it has changed the way the recruiting industry works and that it is faster, more efficient and cheaper than traditional methods (e.g. Browne, 1998; Useem, 1999; Stellar Services Home Page, 2000; Kay, 2000; topjobs.com.au, 2000)

Despite the hyperbole³ that surrounds the unlimited and unbounded potential of the Web I will argue rather than representing a paradigmatic transformation, the practise of electronic recruitment is little more than a linguistic shift from recruitment to e-cruitment. The same processes of selection and recruitment are followed - what appears to have changed dramatically though is the effectiveness of this technological tool to defend against the anxieties generated by the process of selection and recruitment.

On-line Recruitment as a Defense Against Anxiety

Much of the analysis of the human-computer interaction created by the use of the Internet whether psychological (Young, 1996; Aram, 1998; Wallace, 1999) technical (Hiltz and Turoff, 1993; Day and Kovacs, 1996) or critical cultural analysis (Wynn and Katz, 1997) appears either to focus on the conduct of commerce in general (i.e. electronic commerce) or people's involvement in emails, discussion groups, virtual reality environments (such as MUDS and MOOS) bulletin boards and so on for business and pleasure. At this stage, there appears to be no other analysis of the instrumental transaction of self required by the technology of e-cruitment.

On-line recruiting provides a range of services to applicants and employers alike. In addition to the posting of job vacancies, recruitment sites allow people to build their resumes, use the pro-formas available for covering letters and apply for jobs on-line. Some of the more sophisticated sites include extensive behavioural questions to "allow a more accurate career match" (Conroy, 1999). Even without a specific position available resumes can be posted on the Net for potential employers to access.

The use of the Internet is clearly a perfect tool to address the requirement for a large global pool of potential applicants and holds out the promise of "finding good people fast, cost effectively and with broadest market reach" (advertising brochure on recruitment.com Conference, May, 2000). With claims of reach and access that transcend national borders and appears without boundaries, on-line recruitment can be understood as providing the possibility that the "perfect" employee who is "out there" can be found and attracted to join any organisation. These promises of on-line recruitment serves as reassurance for those whose task is to find "the right person for the right job at the right time."

For recruitment companies and companies conducting their own recruitment on-line, software and hardware has now been developed to sort resumes matching key words to pre-set criteria, to conduct on-line psychological and behavioural testing, to interview applicants and generate letters for unsuccessful applicants (see McCune, 1998). Interactive voice response or computer assisted telephone-screening systems have also been developed to automate the recruitment process (McCune, 1998; Davey, 1998). Should it be required the technology can ensure no human involvement in the process of selection and recruitment.

² The first article I have been able to find that discusses the use of the Internet to recruit staff was in 1995. The trickle of articles in 1996 and 1997 is now a torrent as any glance at an electronic data-base will attest.

³ For example the banner of a flyer for a two-day conference in November, 1999 on on-line recruitment began with *The labour market is undergoing a paradigm shift. Recruiters not exploiting the cost efficiency, speed and reach of the Internet will find their company floundering in the face of their competitors.*

The technology of the Internet is portrayed as objective, rational, impersonal and powerful (Shade, 1997), it provides anonymity and can transcend gender, ethnic, racial differences and avoid being prejudicial or discriminatory⁴. The many claims of the technology in general and the Internet in particular make it a very attractive tool for recruiters not just for its reputed efficiencies but because the new relationship between recruiter and recruit diminishes any direct human involvement in the selection process. It is a recruiter's dream.

Just as the use of technology in the finance industry has changed the concept of "customer" from a flesh and blood person who meets with a teller or a consultant or a bank manager to a transaction file that details dealings with bank services (Arnold, 1998), the use of on-line recruiting has changed a potential job applicant to a resume and the recruitment company to "a portal for job-seekers" (Steggall, 2000).

Not only has the technology changed the nature of the recruitment relationship but it has also fragmented or split the potential applicant according to a technologically determined set of criteria. This fragmentation although dehumanising, nonetheless serves as a useful defense against the anxieties experienced by recruiters. The technologies of Internet recruitment serve as very effective gatekeepers and only those who meet the stringent criteria of the recruitment protocols are able to lodge their application on-line. It is the system that rejects or excludes applicants – not the recruiters.

It has been suggested cyberspace provides the advantage of communication without the gaze (Young, 1996). The advantage of Internet recruitment is the gaze is not only not received, it is not necessary to be cast. Recruiters do not ever have to "see" the people they may want or not want to recruit – the anonymity of the Net renders each party invisible to the Other. It is as if the denial of any human involvement in the process of recruiting/ being recruited diminishes the emotional and psychological dynamic of the relationship.

From a psychodynamic perspective the attractiveness of on-line recruitment can be understood as instituting a social system that depersonalises job-seekers and removes any subjective engagement between recruiter and potential employees. Just as Menzies identified the way in which ritualised systems served as an antidote to the anxieties of nursing, so too does the use of Internet technology to conduct selection and recruitment allow recruiters deny the anxieties generated by recruitment.

⁴ Although gender "has not vaporized in cyberspace" (Wallace, 1999), other features that trigger stereotypes are not readily apparent on the Internet. Nonetheless a lawsuit against the creator of a recruitment software program alleged discrimination on the basis of race (Click, 1997)

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