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Matchmaking under uncertainty: how hiring criteria and requirements in professional work are co-created

Abstract

Purpose

The aim of the study is to understand how the hiring process develops in cases where there are no explicit or formal requirements. How do implicit and informal criteria and requirements impact the process of selecting the right candidate?

Design/methodology/approach

A qualitative approach was employed through the use of semi-structured interviews with 47 external recruitment consultants in the south of England.

Findings

In contrast to what is assumed in mainstream Human Resource Management literature, employers do not rely on a comprehensive implicit understanding of what is needed in cases where there are no explicit criteria and requirements. Instead, high uncertainty makes the development of criteria and requirements incremental and negotiable but also problematic. The analysis shows that three mechanisms compensate for the lack of certainty in the hiring process. First, interviews with applicants shape how the hiring criteria develops. Second, market signals of what is available in the labour market help construct the criteria and requirements. Third, criteria and requirements are interpreted and negotiated during interactions with recruiters and others.

Originality

Hiring without explicit requirements and criteria is often understood as rather unproblematic and/or not fundamentally distinct from hiring with them. The study shows that in these cases the process becomes more unpredictable and more open to interpretation and negotiation.

Keywords: hiring, criteria, requirements, intermediaries, interpretation

Introduction

The hiring process is often understood as a matching process between a) candidates and their skill, knowledge and (productive) characteristics, and b) jobs with technical and functional-specific criteria of performance and suitability criteria, such as attitude, manner and organisational fit (Picardi, 2020). To make appropriate recruitment decisions, employers' requirements must be accurately matched with candidates' profiles. During this process, job requirements and hiring criteria must, ideally, be stable, transparent and set from the beginning¹. However, requirements and criteria can be (largely) hidden from the hiring process. In these cases, employers will not formalise them or make them explicit. It is assumed by some that in these cases, employers will select candidates based on their experience of recruiting similar roles elsewhere (i.e. implicit notions of criteria and requirements) (Heneman and Judge 2012), or, by others that the lack of formal or explicit criteria and requirements does not profoundly change the hiring process (Finlay and Coverdill 2002). Yet alternative explanations have not been tested. Not enough is known about why employers enter the hiring process without criteria or requirements and how this impacts the hiring process. There is not much empirical evidence for why criteria and requirements are not made explicit and how that may affect the hiring process. To find out, we investigate the experiences of external recruiters, who work closely with employers. The study uses data from 47 semi-structured interviews with recruitment consultants who predominantly recruit for finance positions, the public sector, marketing, and engineering in England.

Understanding the phenomenon of hiring without explicit criteria and requirements opens up the recruitment process black box. What role do implicit assumptions play in what is needed to find the right candidate, and to what extent do actors, such as recruitment consultants, use their experiences and preferences to shape what is deemed to be required? Here we apply a sociological understanding of

hiring in which hiring becomes a social process during which various actors make sense of what is required, what is offered and what is important for the advertised role (Bills et al. 2017). Too often, the recruitment and selection (R&S) process is treated as a “relatively simple, mechanistic ‘matching’ process and the problems associated with it as being largely technical in nature” (James and Keep 2010: 1). Although it is accepted that the criteria demonstrate the social biases of assessors (Rivera 2012; Sharone 2014; Silva 2018), the criteria and requirements themselves are assumed to originate from the organisation’s objectively assessed work requirements (Lievens 2007).

Why requirements and criteria are not visible

Within textbook Human Resource Management (HRM), defining requirements is seen as the first step in the recruitment process. Here, present and future staffing needs, in conjunction with job analysis and human resource planning, are determined (e.g. Brannick et al. 2007; Brewster et al. 2015). Organisations construct a *role profile*, which “defines the natural purpose of the role, its reporting relationship and the key result areas” (Armstrong and Taylor 2014: 226). It also consists of a *person specification* that defines the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) needed to take on the role and the behavioural competencies, education, training, and work experience required in relation to them (Armstrong and Taylor 2014: 226). This specification should also be in line with the broader organisational culture, needs and values. After this has been completed, organisations then proceed to recruit candidates in either external or internal labour markets. In other words, under normal circumstances, the requirements are set at the beginning of the process. Wood et al. (2014: 26) explain that the recruitment process can be sequenced as going from: a) job analysis; to b) job description; to c) person specification decision; to d) recruitment strategy choice set; to e) advertising; and to f) selection of the best candidate. Although the authors admit that this is an ideal type, this type of model is widely used to understand how recruitment and selection occur.

It has been observed by some that employers enter the recruitment process without a job analysis or description. For instance, research on idiosyncratic jobs indicates that some roles are

explicitly created to fit new members, making the hiring process less structured around organisational requirements (Miner 1987; Keller 2018). A related example is opportunistic hiring, in which organisations hire employees before their jobs exist (Levesque 2005). However, for ‘regular’ job openings, criteria and requirements may indeed exist in the minds of employers but are not made explicit through formal criteria and requirements. Within HRM, it has been argued that they are not always deemed necessary. Supported by the validity generalisation theory, experts assert that very different jobs may rely on very similar knowledge, skills, and abilities (Pearlman et al. 1980; Smith 1994; Heneman and Judge 2012). It can therefore be seen as both rational and effective. Others acknowledge the practice, but warn that this should be avoided (Sobocka-Szczapa 2021). While there is disagreement within HRM on the extent to which omitting requirements and criteria represent a suboptimal hiring strategy, there is no substantial doubt those employers have a comprehensive understanding of what is required, albeit implicit.

Labour market intermediaries

A contrasting explanation argues that criteria and requirements are not crucial, not because they are known or shared by the employer but because the hiring process is fundamentally about finding out what is needed. Existing research on labour market intermediaries has indicated that the process of hiring remains the same whether criteria and requirements are formalised or not. There has been considerable interest in the work of intermediaries, in particular headhunters, during the last 20 years (e.g. Finlay and Coverdill 2002; King et al. 2005; Hamori 2010; Peltokorpi 2021). Benner (2003) explains that intermediaries can reduce the transaction costs for the employer and jobseeker. They may shorten a job search by providing labour market intelligence based on their experience and knowledge of industries and pools of labour. They can also provide quick access to both employers and jobseekers and enhance social networks available to these actors. External recruitment consultants (or recruiters) work with employers to find candidates to match employers’ criteria and requirements. In some sectors, recruitment consultants support the recruitment of candidates for a wide range of roles within an organisation; however, in other cases, they are only involved in difficult-to-fill roles. Almost invariably,

they are engaged in attracting candidates when hired but are also often involved in screening candidates or supporting the selection process. Some recruitment consultants are on retainers, but most are not. Employers who use external recruitment consultants frequently call on the assistance of multiple recruitment consultancy firms. In many of these cases, it is only the firm that supplies the successful placement that receives financial remuneration. Usually, recruiters meet with their clients to discuss roles and requirements before commencing the search process.

Research on labour market intermediaries highlights the interpretive and strategic nature of finding suitable candidates for the positions they recruit for. Gautie et al. (2005) explain how headhunters within the executive search market use idiosyncratic categories of evaluation to assess a candidate's fit with the job profile and personality demands. Kinnunen and Parviainen (2016) explain that when Finnish recruitment consultants find suitable candidates, they 'read' applicants' professional competencies by assessing their behaviours and gestures during an interview. This makes them become 'powerful agents who also count on their own preferences'(p.18). King et al. (2005) find that consultants act as gatekeepers to employment opportunities, such as preferring previously placed candidates and influencing clients to do the same (see also Faulconbridge et al. 2009). Like employers, recruiters have shown social bias in their judgement of candidates (Stone and Wright 2013; Ndobo et al. 2018). They can be strongly driven by their own commercial interests and strategies to have a sufficient supply of workers (McCollum and Findlay 2018).

This body of work suggests that hiring criteria are usually merely the starting point for recruitment consultants when undertaking searches. Hiring managers do not inform recruitment consultants about what they are *actually* looking for. Consultants go to considerable lengths to identify what the employer wants. Many of these are idiosyncratic factors that are employer-specific. For instance, Finlay and Coverdill (2002; see also Coverdill and Finlay, 1998; 2017) emphasise the lack of utility of formal specification in the hiring process. Their research on executive headhunters shows that specifications are "not credible indicators of what is sought in candidates (Finlay and Coverdill 2002, p.122)." The authors emphasise the importance of hidden baseline experiences or skills that give a particular employer reason to become sufficiently excited about a candidate to extend an offer, named 'hot

buttons' which are not part of the specifications. Headhunters work to discover and, if necessary, construct hot buttons to make a successful placement. Employers never really know what they are explicitly looking for. This means that the actions of consultants—trying to figure out what employers actually want—look much the same regardless of whether hiring criteria are specified or not.

So both positions argue that criteria and requirements are not always needed. According to the HRM literature, employers invariably have a solid enough understanding what they desire but don't always share these ideas. According to studies on intermediaries, formal criteria and requirements do not offer much help within the hiring process. The remainder of the article will assess how recruiters deal with implicit and informal job criteria and requirements and whether and how this changes the hiring process.

Methodology

This article relies on qualitative interview data, taken from a research project on recruitment and selection in the skilled labour market, to analyse how employers use criteria and requirements when recruiting new employees. The study aims to understand how employers and recruiters make decisions on what is demanded and deemed salient for particular occupations, sectors and organisations. The project relied on 47 interviews with recruitment consultants based in England. Recruitment consultants are external labour market intermediaries who are paid by an employer to provide assistance in the recruitment and selection process when job openings become available.

The study draws on interviews with 47 recruitment consultants working for 45 different recruitment consultancies based in England, and predominantly in the greater London area. The consultants were identified with the help of LinkedIn (a professional social media website) and the websites of recruitment companies. Consultants were approached via email. The sample was constructed to achieve the key aim of the wider research project – comparing recruitment practices between various sectors and role types. The sample comprised of consultants recruiting for positions in

marketing (N=10), finance (N=10), the public sector (N=9), engineering (N=9), management consultancy (N=5), and law (N=4).ⁱⁱ These represent large sectors of the UK's skilled labour market. They also represent considerable differences in terms of the type of skills used at work (e.g. soft vs hard skills).

The majority of participants were selected and recruited to purposefully allow a significant variation in gender and experience. Most of the interviews were conducted face to face at the interviewees' workplaces or at a nearby café. A small number of interviews were undertaken via telephone (N=6). The interviews were held between January 2018 and December 2019. One semi-structured interview with each participant was conducted in a setting chosen by the interviewee. The duration of the interviews was between 30 minutes and two hours or more, with the majority lasting for more than an hour.

The interviews covered what employers look for, the R&S processes, how decisions are made, the importance of particular recruitment tools and the role of the sector in the process. Specific pertinent questions were around the employers' understanding of their recruitment needs and questions about the role of the recruiters in the process.

After reading and listening to several transcripts, they were thematically coded using the NVivo software package. Themes were then identified around the (lack of) criteria and requirements mentioned in the data, or data in which the employer's needs and demands were expressed. The data was then hand-coded to analyse their patterns in more detail, in particular highlighting when criteria and requirements are created and how they are used. Coded segments were then selected for their representativeness. They clustered around uncertainty and negotiation, which became meaningful in the latter stage of the analysis. All the participants were given pseudonyms.

There are limitations to this methodological approach. First, external recruiters are not utilised for all positions nor are they used by all organisations. The CIPD (2009, p.9) reports that, according to their survey, 78% of UK employers use recruitment agencies, but for many job openings, external recruiters are not involved (in particular when they are low-skilled positions). Second, most external recruiters assist in the recruitment process and, therefore, have fewer experiences of how employers act

within the selection stage. Third, this approach does not examine any exogenous factors that shape job criteria such as HR policies, labour regulations, or institutional isomorphism. Finally, the focus being away from the workers also limits our view. Jobseekers are not passive vessels of skills, experience, and personality waiting to match requirements. They are active agents who interpret and respond to the criteria and requirements.

Findings

This study strongly confirms that employers do not always use job criteria and requirements at the beginning of the recruitment and selection process. In other words, they are likely to have some thoughts about whom to hire but go into the recruitment process without explicit or formal job requirements and criteria. They understand that they need someone – the need for additional manpower has been established by the organisation (for instance, identified through increasing work pressures) – but it is not clear what a fit could or should look like. In some sectors, these employers are quite rare. For instance, within social work, recruitment criteria are highly standardised and strongly revolve around work experience and expertise. This sector is also heavily unionised. Similarly, for employers who employ chartered engineers, the criteria are set in exact terms right from the start. So unlike the headhunters in Coverdill and Finlay's study employers frequently know exactly what they need, and can identify their needs and rely on the recruiters' experience and connections to find a suitable match. However, almost all recruiters (N=44) shared that they occasionally deal with employers who haven't made the criteria and requirements of a role explicit at the beginning of the recruitment process and haven't done so when moving deeper into the selection process. This can happen in both large and small organisations.

Why are criteria and requirements not made explicit?

From the data, four key reasons emerge in relation to why employers may not have criteria and requirements prepared when a new position is advertised.

1. *Employers do not know what they need.* A key reason relates to the inability to define what the role will encompass. In organisations of all sizes, new positions are created, or existing roles are transformed. In practice, frequently, there remains uncertainty about what tasks, activities and responsibilities are attached to them. At the stage of recruitment, line managers often cannot fully define the role, and in some cases, this still does not become entirely clear until the new person has joined the organisation. Recruiters observe that, for new or updated roles, employers may have initial thoughts, but these are partial and temporary and subject to substantial change:

Like inevitably, they tell you they want to hire X, and they end up hiring Y. And I think that's because they start the process thinking, okay, this is what I need, and then you find out, that's not actually what you need, and it's the process of trying to get there. So, no, they don't..... They go, actually, that is important, but it's not as important as this. We thought at the beginning of the process we wanted that, we know that isn't as attractive, so we'll... so, it happens all the time, it happens all the time. [Isla, local government]

It may be that there is an initial idea, but the imagined position changes under scrutiny:

We took a brief a couple of weeks ago, and the employer had no idea what they were looking for and quite often they will say, "Right, we want somebody to come in and do this, this, this and this", and you go "Well you've asked for three different people to do one job, so that's going to be very difficult". [Tom, digital marketing]

2. *Recruiting for new or atypical positions.* Employers may have a robust notion of the role but lack understanding about which candidate profile would fit. This can happen when an organisation is not familiar with dealing with these types of positions, e.g. when a completely new position is created or when a role is merged or significantly altered. In these cases, employers struggle to construct a job profile as the needed or preferred skills, abilities, and characteristics are uncertain. This ambiguity is demonstrated by the experiences of Esme:

We've worked with one client since probably last, end of the year I think, and their marketing team was sort of evolving. So, we helped them with what that might look like, and then within that, then they've had their own changes within the business. So, the roles keep changing and keep evolving, and so they don't really know. Well, they think they need something, and then something changes, and they decide they need something else. So, it's quite fluid. [Esme, Marketing]

As a result, the recruitment process is defined by constructing and trying out of profiles that may work for these positions. Tan (2015) observes a similar process in the high-end cuisine sector called 'negotiated joining'. New roles are explicitly understood to be provisional, and roles are developed over time through an iterative process of learning and negotiation, which create open-ended criteria. Singh (2008) observes that job analysis becomes more challenging within a changing work landscape. Organisations need to allow for flexibility in their job analysis to accommodate rapid shifts in the modern workplace. It is important to note that the recruiters in the study identified an intention to utilise a defined role profile, but it quickly became evident that the employer's initial ideas were unsuitable and so were discarded. As a result, there was no clear profile to offer guidance during the process.

3. Internal processes. The third reason for job criteria and requirements not being developed relates to the recruitment and selection process itself. Occasionally, the individuals involved, including the recruitment consultant, have opposing views of what is required and what kind of profile would match the requirements. Recruiters commented that this makes establishing a set of coherent and clear criteria challenging or impossible, as expressed by Theresa and Grace:

Theirs is the whole leadership team, and then there's a committee and members behind it so there's quite a lot of people involved in that decision-making process. So for that to align, is often quite challenging. [Theresa, local government]

Equally you know, I think as more people get involved in a process, like more Hiring Managers or more people in the business, I guess you're sort of open to too many opinions. [Grace, finance]

4. *Unrealistic initial demands.* Recruiters explain that some employers have very specific criteria and requirements regarding the candidates they want to attract, often starting with an ideal type. HR personnel or consultants point out to them that the *perceived* labour market realities make these demands unworkable and encourage employers to reconsider and change requirements according to what is deemed feasible in relation to the existing labour market. As a result ambiguity and confusion emerge about which profiles would be acceptable and employers and recruiters thus start out with very few or no clear or set criteria and requirements.

In all four scenarios, the information they get from employers is inadequate or ambiguous and as a result, heightened uncertainty dominates the hiring process. In principle, uncertainty shapes hiring in various ways (Kanter 1977; Windolf and Wood 1988; Miller and Rosenbaum 1997). It is accepted that employers face uncertainty about the productivity of job candidates (e.g. Spence 1973) and that jobseekers face uncertainty about job prospects (e.g. Granovetter 1974). Following agency theory, economists stress that the employment relationship between an employer (the principal) and an employee (the agent) is defined by asymmetric information due to “moral hazard” (e.g. a change in the behaviour of the candidate after being selected) or “adverse selection” (e.g. hidden characteristics of applicants). We also know there exists great variety in the criteria that employers set when they recruit and in the variety of criteria that can be used to assess candidates’ profiles (Musselin 2002; Lamont 2009). How does the inability to set criteria and requirements shape the recruitment process?

Mechanisms that compensate for the lack of certainty

In cases in which criteria and requirements are not made explicit, consultants use three heuristic or interpretive substitutes to clarify a candidate’s profile and to determine how they should be assessed.

1. Criteria are set by trial and error

Criteria are contingent on the process of finding out what is required. This course of action is described by recruiters as ‘trial and error’. With new information and recruitment experience and input, criteria and requirements can shift even within the selection process. Crucially, meeting candidates can change the focus of the job profile:

*The search for candidates is based on what they think they’re looking for, and then they’ll realise actually, no, they don’t want that person, and we’ll have to do it all over again, which is very frustrating as you can imagine. And that happens very often (...) a lot of the time, they meet people, and they think actually, we want someone with this experience because we don’t feel that people with that experience would work in the position, and that’s happened quite a lot of times.
[Heather, marketing]*

Sometimes they think they know what they want, but then they meet people, and they’re like, “Actually, it’s something different”. So it’s down to us to also give them a different option. [Felix, public sector]

After meeting a particular candidate, a hiring manager may also change the relative importance of the specific criteria. Depending on whom employers meet, they can drop, add, or re-value particular skills, abilities, work experience, qualifications and characteristics from within their wish list. Alice, who recruits for legal positions, highlights how unpredictable criteria and requirements can become after employers meet candidates:

Often will receive CVs and decide on who they want to interview, but often when they see the real-life person they then, it then can help them to find what it is that they do and don’t want (...)

So a lot of the time, even if clients think they want a certain profile they might end up with a completely different profile, that might either be based on the actual person because sometimes they might say they want a four-year qualified commercial Lawyer and we find them a two-year qualified banking Lawyer or corporate Lawyer, but they're so amazing in person and the personality fit is in line with what they're looking for. [Alice, law]

This type of experimentation goes beyond a general openness that one would expect within the recruitment process.

2. Market signals dictate requirements

Hiring requirements and criteria are frequently in flux, or develop slowly over time, rather than being set at the beginning of the recruitment and selection process. As alluded to earlier, the perceptions of the supply side, i.e. the expected pool of suitable candidates that can be recruited, will shape requirements. The job criteria are, thus, not solid but are shaped by the construction of 'the market'. Studies by Lockyer and Scholarios (2004) and Modestino et al. (2020) confirm that employee skill requirements increase when there is a more abundant supply of relevant job seekers and decrease when there are fewer applicants. In labour market segments, or sectors in which a shortage of candidates exists, perceptions of the supply side fundamentally structure employers' demands. The criteria and requirements are then constructed and adjusted until employers and recruiters believe they can attract suitable or high-quality candidates. A lack of interest from potential applicants may shape the criteria and requirements, even if this substantially changes the recruitment strategy, as demonstrated by Grace:

I can't find them what they want in London, in the London market, so they're actually thinking of taking it down a totally different route now, which we never even discussed in the first brief back in January. [Grace, finance]

It is important to stress that the references to the market are *interpretive* judgements on the nature of the labour market and the expected pool of candidates that can be attracted. The market becomes a construct to demarcate what is deemed realistic. Watson (2018) observes a thingification of 'the market'

concept. Economists and politicians use the market strategically to describe a political reality in which the entity of the market cannot be overwritten or challenged. The concept of ‘the market’, as understood and used by actors in the hiring process, is not based on any ideological or theoretical notion; however, it is presented and utilised as a unified abstract phenomenon ‘out there’. The market can, therefore, be used discursively to create objectivity or salience behind the proposed criteria. In these cases, perceptions of what is supplied create perceptions of what is demanded. Labour markets then work not as matchmaking sites under uncertainty but as a process of defining and interpreting matches. Both employers and recruiters refer to perceived market signals of market scarcity and availability in trying to make sense of what is required or desirable under uncertainty.

3. Criteria and requirements are interpreted and negotiated

If requirements and criteria are formally absent, they are open for negotiation. In particular, social fit is an area of contention, resolved through ongoing deliberation. A lack of clarity about suitable or acceptable personalities or professional backgrounds opens up negotiations between recruiters (whether internal or external), hiring managers and other stakeholders, as to whether the candidate’s social or professional profiles match the organisational or social profile of the company.ⁱⁱⁱ As stated earlier, some of these discussions can be initiated in an *ad hoc* manner via exposure to the applicants during interview situations, but also within the recruitment phase, as demonstrated by Scott, who recruits for government positions:

but I think it is our job to challenge...they may say, “This person is currently working in a bank,” and we may come back and say, “Yes, but that’s investment banking, and in our view, the culture that operates in investment banking is so different from this organisation that we will go, we will look, but we are going to tell you right up front that we think that these people are unlikely to be a good fit for your organisation. So let us talk to you about where else these people are.” [Scott, government]

Many recruiters observe that some employers can be overly narrow in their ideas on what constitutes acceptable candidates:

I think companies can be very blinkered and be very too prescriptive in what they're looking for. [Leon, management consultancy]

In these cases, recruiters will try to negotiate to widen criteria if they think they cannot find suitable candidates or, just as importantly, find candidates within a short period (within a competitive recruitment market in which, under normal circumstances, multiple agencies are involved). In addition, recruiters often actively bring to hiring managers' attention individuals with alternative characteristics in terms of skill set or experience. Through negotiation and re-interpretation of the initial criteria and requirements, concessions are gradually made:

then after the first round, if the first round of interviews don't work out for them then they become a lot more, they'll be more flexible and we can more kind of have our influence over them. [Anthony, infrastructure]

In other cases, the requirements can also be narrowed down and become more detailed, in particular when there are, initially, none or very few (“Some clients might not even have a job spec, and they'll just say, oh, we want somebody who's going to be good at this” Esme, marketing). Consider Ralph, a recruiter for the legal sector, who gives an example of the concision and vagueness of some recruitment briefs:

I don't actually care what their background is, I just want somebody who is, who's fun, who's cool, who's, you know, can deal with the sales guys and the tech guys and it doesn't matter if they're an employment Lawyer or a Litigator or a corporate Lawyer, I just want somebody that's, you know, that's great, who fits in. And that's sometimes all our brief is (...) our job is to go away and go “Great, where do we start with that?” But you know, that's kind of exciting

and also very challenging because it is a needle in a haystack to find that sort of brief and that's very subjective, someone "who is fun and who is cool and who fits in", like to what?

From this quote, we can see that neither work experience requirements nor the candidates' technical profiles are set, but that soft skills and social fit preferences can equally be under interpretation. Consultants can have a lot of freedom in redefining requirements through negotiation. However, for many, it simultaneously constitutes a challenge as they do not know or understand employers' preferences. These may unfold rather slowly. In some cases, external consultants are brought in when uncertainty exists about what suitable and realistic criteria and requirements should be. In most cases, recruiters are brought in because of their understanding of the market and their superior attraction capabilities. Yet, it is clear that recruitment agencies do not just serve to help employers identify qualified candidates; they help define what a qualified candidate is. Consultants also have a clear financial interest in matching the criteria with the candidates they represent and often are vulnerable due to existing competition with other recruiters which can result in opportunistic behaviour towards employers.

Concluding discussion

This article has analysed how recruitment criteria and requirements emerge in cases where they are not made explicit by employers. Contrasting mainstream HRM literature as well as existing studies on labour intermediaries we argue that these cases are distinct from cases in which employers use structured criteria and requirements. According to recruiters, employers do not abandon formal requirements or criteria due to their implicit understanding of what is needed based on previous hires or understanding of the role involved. Nor do formal specifications and criteria lack utility in offering information about what is sought in candidates. Instead, the findings support the idea that heightened uncertainty leads to the lack of criteria and requirements during the recruitment process. As a result, the hiring process becomes much more open to interpretation and negotiation than in regular hiring, leading to unpredictable hiring outcomes. Consultants may actively shape the requirements to their advantage

in hires where set requirements and criteria are not set, which potentially opens the door to recruiting individuals understood to be available rather than best matched with the actual job requirements.

This paper advances the literature in (at least) two ways. Rarely do employers recruit without some kind of idea of what they desire. Nevertheless, the study shows that recruitment criteria and requirements are not exclusively set at the beginning of the process but are created over a more extended period. The mainstream literature incorrectly assumes that hiring without criteria and requirements are a deliberate choice by employers; instead, there seems to be a genuine struggle to find appropriate job profiles and specifications. This matters because those cases may lead to labour market outcomes that are not the direct product of the informed decisions of rational optimising by employers, but of an interpretive intersubjective process during which the criteria and requirements are often formed haphazardly over time. This may also lead to outcomes that are unpredictable and do not serve fairness (Moss and Tilly 1996; Bozionelos 2005). To better capture these processes, a theoretical framework of hiring is needed in which the decision-making process itself is seen as developmental and incremental.

Second, the study contrasts and advances the extant literature on how intermediaries influence the hiring process (Coverdill and Finlay 1998; Gautie et al. 2005; King et al. 2005). Existing studies correctly propose that interpretation and negotiation are not merely aberrations to a rationalised and predictable process, but do not recognize the lack of criteria and requirements as problematic and distinctive. This study shows that where employers do not have explicit or formalised criteria and requirements the hiring process is distinct from situations where employers do have (realistic) criteria and requirements.

Notes

ⁱ Hiring requirements refer to the description of the type of candidate that employers are looking for, including the tasks the hire will undertake and the responsibilities they will have. 'Hiring criteria' represents the specification of characteristics against which a judgement is made, deemed either essential or desirable in the recruitment and/or selection process. These concepts are analytically distinct but can show a considerable overlap.

ⁱⁱ Recruiters who recruit for law and management consultancy roles are used to contextualise the findings further. They are not case studies in themselves and, therefore, the number of interviews related to them is lower.

ⁱⁱⁱ Many recruiters commented that these judgements on social fit are mediated by the social background of those involved (a topic worthy of sociological analysis, but not within the scope of this article).

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