
PART I

The Selector's Perspective

The selector's responsibility is awesome. Selectors must make the right decision for the organisation, for the applicants, for those rejected, for those the new recruit will be working with, and for themselves. No matter how we dress it up and assert that applicants make decisions as well, the power relationships and the salvation or opportunity that a new job offers means that recruits are rarely able to exercise their prerogative fully. In most circumstances, the selector makes the selection decision and unless they do something stupid (as we will see), the applicant accepts the job offer.

For many managers, selection decisions are the largest ones they make, although many do not realise this. Imagine the recruitment of someone on a relatively modest starting salary of £20,000. Assuming they stay in the same job for five years, the basic salary costs are £100,000 in 'today's money'. To this, a further 25% should be added for employment costs. On top of these employment costs, the 'costs' of mistakes must be added and the income associated with high performance should be deducted. Any way you look at it, these are big decisions. And yet, despite the size and ramifications of selectors' decisions, the diverse ways in which people tackle recruitment and selection are extraordinary. Some people are so overwhelmed by it that they become 'frozen in the headlights', some seek out training or help and advice from colleagues, while others are so nonchalant that they do no preparation.

When it comes to making the decision of whom to employ, selectors find themselves in a frustrating position. Most do not have the skills, qualifications or time to develop sophisticated new selection techniques such as personality or ability tests, in-tray exercises or assessment centres, and therefore have to rely on interviews, but they realise how weakly based their decisions are. They

want more data, they want reliable data, and they want better indicators of who will perform well and who will not. There is a strong sense of frustration in many of the stories in this book.

This sense of frustration is compounded by the nature of the training selectors receive. A common feature of 'fair selection' and 'effective interviewing' courses is that they leave delegates terrified about the legal consequences of making mistakes and of using their own judgement. Many come away from these courses scared rigid about the recruitment task and they vow to ask every candidate exactly the same questions with no variation or follow-up, as we have seen in Malcolm's story.

There is a balance to be struck. While the responsibility is big, selectors must still perform like human beings. They must be sensitive to the people on the receiving end of their actions, while at the same time gathering enough information of a sufficiently high quality to allow them to make an informed decision.

CHAPTER 1

Responsibility

The goal of recruitment and selection is to find someone willing and able to do a particular job in an effective manner. But it is more than this. Recruitment and selection is a process that touches people at a time when they are particularly receptive to the messages about the organisation, the job and the organisation's expectations of them. These messages shape the way people go about their jobs if they are recruited. It is important, therefore, for the people who determine recruitment and selection strategies to think about the atmosphere and nature of the process and how it might shape the future employee's in-role behaviour. When the strategy is right, the consequences can be very advantageous for the organisation, the recruit, the selector and everyone else. When it goes wrong, the effects can be disastrous for all concerned.

The first story in this section shows a selector realising, and then coming to terms with, his responsibility. He would be a saviour for some; but how do you decide whom to save when there are so many desperate people?

TOM'S STORY: REAL PEOPLE

My employer decided to open a manufacturing plant in Glasgow, which would be their first site in Scotland. Part of my remit, as the new plant manager, was to interview and select our new staff. The vacancies were for staff at all levels, from machine operators to team leaders. Employment adverts were placed in the local Glasgow newspapers, with all replies to be sent to our office in Tyne and Wear. In the first week, over 2200 replies were received. The number of replies astounded us.

The advertisements had previously been used for a campaign in Oxford, where there had been issues over attracting suitable candidates. The site manager had lowered the acceptance criteria, and this had led to 45 replies. When the adverts were run in the Glasgow press, the only change made was the removal of any reference to Oxford. The qualifications required were not changed to take into account that the site location was in an area that had traditionally employed a skilled engineering workforce, and we could therefore expect to attract lots of applications from 'persons with mechanical aptitude'.

I started to sort the applications into three lots, labelled 'yes', 'no' and 'undecided'. With this task completed, I took a second look through the 'no' and 'undecided' lots to make a final decision on their contents. However, I was still left with over 400 'yes' applications, although our initial intake would only be 15 employees. I enlisted the help of another manager to shortlist the applicants. We agreed to a shortlist of 35 applicants for interview.

Arrangements were made to interview the shortlisted candidates at a local Glasgow hotel. The interviews were conducted by the company's operations director and me. While the interview room itself was excellent for interviewing, its location on the third floor left a lot to be desired. Getting candidates from the hotel reception to the interview room almost amounted to a forced march. I collected all the candidates myself. On the way up to the interview room, I described the format of the interview and whom else they would meet. Due to time constraints for the operations director, all of the interviews were held over a three-day period.

All through this selection experience, what struck me was that the bulk of the applicants were unemployed and had been for some time. They had been made redundant, or they were, at best, on fixed-term contracts. Until these events, I had never experienced unemployment on such a scale, and certainly had no personal knowledge of it. 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.

In hindsight, I think that the emotions I felt at the time were partly based on guilt. My own career was taking off. I had a new job, complete with a company car, expense account lunches, great travelling and so on. The short-term impact on me was that for the first time I realised how serious unemployment could be and that it could happen to anyone. I also vowed that no matter what the circumstances, I would never again attempt to interview

so many candidates in such a short space of time. I was drained by the whole experience and still harbour doubts that in every case the right decision was made. In the long term we employed 80 staff, and during this time we changed our recruitment policy to take much closer account of the locality in which we were based. Wherever possible we recruited from areas of high unemployment, using local agencies such as the Govan Initiative and Job Centres for assistance. This policy was so successful in providing quality employees that it became the standard practice for recruiting non-specialist labour within the company.

Of all the stories I received, few touched me like Tom's. Here is a man confronted by the enormity of his responsibility and who understands the impact his decisions will have: 'I would be responsible for some of them returning to work, in one case after 18 months of job searching.' Tom is clearly quite emotional about the decisions he had to make. This is not just due to the plight of the applicants, but also because of the clash between his upwardly mobile career and their desperation. Tom feels guilty about his own success. To his credit, he sought help. He has learned from the experience and influenced company policy.

Despite the way in which Tom was touched by the stories of the applicants and his desire to help people, it might seem surprising that he found himself designing a selection process that restricted the applicants' opportunity to present themselves: 'Due to time constraints for the operations director, all of the interviews were held over a three-day period.' Interviewing 11 or 12 people a day is quite a chore. Even experienced interviewers who do the job for a living would baulk at this. Among the likely problems are remembering who each person was, tiredness, weakening concentration and fading enthusiasm. Moreover, designing a process involving so many people in such a short period will obviously reduce the amount of time that can be spent with each person.

This story exposes one of the selector's biggest dilemmas: shortlisting. Although Tom was surprised to receive over 2000 applications, such a postbag is not uncommon during periods of hardship. Tom reduced this number to a shortlist of 35. The selection ratio at this point was 1:63. In other words, just 1.6% of the applicants made it through to the shortlist. When this figure is compared to the selection ratio from shortlist to job offer (i.e. 1:2.33 or 42.9%), it highlights shortlisting as by far the most brutal stage in this recruitment and selection process, which is not uncommon. Getting onto the shortlist is the greatest challenge for an applicant.

Historically, the shortlisting process has been poorly supported by selection technology. Selectors have had to rely on a largely subjective assessment of

CVs and application forms. Fortunately for people who, like Tom, receive large numbers of applications, this is one aspect of the process where technology has moved on apace. It is now quite common for applicants to be directed to pre-screening on a computer, often via the Internet. Not only does this pre-screening capture important biographical and contact data, it can also confront potential applicants with some selection tests and decide whom to invite for further selection tests. Tom was looking to fill a range of jobs for which 'mechanical aptitude' was a common requirement. Is an interview the best way to assess this? Would it have been possible to develop a screening test based on this aptitude that could have helped him reduce the initial pile of applications?

Finally, as I reflect on this story, I find myself wondering about the impact this approach to recruitment and selection (i.e. looking to the ranks of the unemployed) might have within the company. Assuming that people with the appropriate knowledge and skills can be found, this source of labour must create a particular organisational culture. I hesitate to inject a note of cynicism into my analysis of the story as I am absolutely sure that Tom and his organisation act from the most worthy of motives, but their actions must influence the internal working environment. Do those 'saved' from unemployment fear losing their jobs again? What impact do these people have on other workers? Is this workforce more compliant than it otherwise would be?

Tom's story is an example of a selector recognising his wider responsibility to society, the unemployed and the disadvantaged. But there are other responsibilities and sometimes they conflict with the nobler responsibility that Tom confronted. Laura's story shows how the pressures to find people to do important work sometimes mean that selectors become less honourable than they might wish.

LAURA'S STORY: THE EVENING SHIFT

At about 10 a.m., two hours into the day shift, a line manager came into the Human Resource (HR) department. This particular manager, like many others, had been with the company for many years; in his case, approximately 20 years. He asked if he could use one of the offices in the department that afternoon to conduct some interviews. Nobody within the HR department knew of any pending recruitment. When the training manager expressed his concern, he was told, 'Schedules have gone up unexpectedly so we need more evening shift workers to start tonight.'

The training manager was visibly shocked and asked the manager to consider the gravity of his words. What were his selection criteria? What training

arrangements had been made for these people? Induction? Contracts? Productivity? The long-term costs? The reply is still difficult to believe: 'I haven't got time for all that. I'm going round the shop floor now asking people if they know anyone who wants a job. I'm only asking the good ones though.'

The interviews were conducted that afternoon, each lasting approximately five minutes. The manager was asked again what selection criteria he was using. 'I'm asking them who it was from the shop floor who contacted them to make sure it was a good one. Then I'm asking if they know what it is we make, and if they're nimble fingered, and if they've got kids. I'll make sure they have got someone to look after them.'

It was probably around the time of this incident that I began to realise that some managers, whom I had felt intimidated by because of their length of experience compared with my own, did not deserve to be held in such high regard. In fact, I began to think that maybe I was a little better than I would give myself credit for. I began to question how an organisation could condone this type of behaviour (this manager was not alone in his shortcomings) and apparently give credibility to managers and supervisors on their ability to 'crisis manage'.

In the short term this process achieved one objective: it let the manager off the hook when the time came to administer a portion of the blame. When production schedules remained unachieved, it must now be the fault of the 'lazy worker'. There were enough of them now – he'd seen to that – so blame, and plenty of it, lay neatly in the lap of the inexperienced, untrained and slightly bewildered new employees.

The long-term cost of this episode must have been phenomenal. Unfortunately, it was not an isolated incident. The culture of the organisation had evolved to accept this as the norm. Staff promotion, historically, was based on an individual's length of service and their ability to instil a little fear in people. Any person not fitting this criteria was considered 'too soft' and so, sadly, did not fit in.

Superficially, this story is about a manager who flouts the rules and apparently has a disregard for proper recruitment and selection procedures. Moreover, Laura paints a picture of an overbearing manager who has little care for people and how they are treated. Indeed, the quotes suggest that he has little respect for his workers ('I'm only asking the good ones'), has sexist attitudes and thinks of employees as lazy. This is a manager for whom we should have no sympathy.

Laura's role as an observer of this episode of recruitment life might trick us into thinking that she is detached from the story and offers us an impartial commentary. However, does this account tell us more about Laura than it does

about the players at the centre of the story? Laura is a junior member of the HR team. She clearly sides with the training manager and has internalised the powerlessness of the HR team to prevent practices such as those of this particular manager. Her words reek of discussions within HR about managers in the rest of the company. There is a helplessness and an 'us against the world' quality to this story. What is really going on here?

It is clear that Laura is personalising the event. She sees the manager as an opinionated bully. The training manager, on the other hand, is the victim of circumstance and long-tenured brutes. In effect, Laura has polarised the story into 'black and white'. Imagine how she might view the situation if she were on the other side of the fence. She might view the manager as the victim. Perhaps he is being harangued by his own boss to keep production up or is being hassled by customers for product. The training manager, on the other hand, might be seen as a bureaucrat who is out of touch with the realities of the business environment. The point is that neither of these standpoints provides a full picture; people are seduced into such partial attributions when conflict appears and emotions rise.

I hate to say it, but I find myself mildly sympathetic to the plight of 'this particular manager'. Not to his attitudes and approach to people, but to the difficult situation he has found himself in. He urgently needs to recruit people to do some manual labour in just eight to ten hours' time. This is almost impossible. The natural approach would be to contact employment agencies and find emergency help. This can be quite expensive and is only possible if you are in a major conurbation or centre of temporary work. You would normally do this through your HR department, but in this case it seems that relations have broken down between HR and the managers on the shop floor; close your eyes and you can hear the stilted conversation between the warring factions. So what is this manager to do? Asking existing employees if they know of anyone who wants work seems a perfectly acceptable way of going about things. A five-minute interview might not be the best way of checking people out, but if this is temporary work that just about anyone could do, selection is less of a hurdle and more of a sales pitch. A problem arises if the jobs have any degree of permanence to them. Then the five-minute interview is clearly an inadequate selection test.

The clash between HR and the shop floor in this story is a classic one. It is a clash of bureaucracy and expediency, hard versus soft management, inflexibility and pragmatism, rigidity and responsiveness, the short term against the long term, and a focus on people versus a focus on production. There are times when all of these qualities could be paramount and there are others when compromise is needed. However, when relationships break down, the powerful win.

The recruiting manager in this story appears to put his organisational responsibility above other responsibilities. His focus is to find staff to maintain production and achieve schedules. There will surely be 'people issues' down the line; not just for the new employees, but also for existing employees who recommended the organisation to friends and relations, and for the managers. The long-term impact of the selector's responsibility is explored in the next story.

ANNE'S STORY: 'I WAS HOPING'

When I originally applied for my present job the advertisement featured more about the organisation than the job. The company was portrayed as an exciting and dynamic organisation. This encouraged me to apply. However, the advertisement did not include anything on experience or skills and the details about the job were vague. As a consequence, hundreds of people applied, many of whom did not have the required skills or experience. The sales director later explained to me that it took him days to look at the CVs. He also explained he selected 15 people to be interviewed. This took him three days. He felt this number was too high and he found it difficult to remember the details of each applicant.

When I was interviewed, I was given incorrect information about the role. The director who interviewed me was not familiar with the tasks associated with the job and his interpretation of what was involved was incorrect. At the time of the interview he explained about the various tasks that were involved. He described the job as being varied and challenging and said I would become involved in many areas of the business. He said that the company was a growing and dynamic one: 'We believe in open communication and value people's opinion.' This made me feel I really wanted to work for this organisation. I imagined the job would be very interesting and the function of my department was not only a sales role, but also one that involved coordinating with other departments. I thought I would be able to put ideas forward and people would listen to my opinions. I thought the organisation would be one I could commit to and remain with for several years. Two days after the interview I was offered the job. I was delighted about this and did not hesitate in accepting it.

On the first day the sales director met me. He introduced me to my staff and those in the immediate area of my desk. He then said he was going out for the morning and left me to settle in. This made me feel uneasy and I was unsure what I should actually do. I decided to introduce myself to the rest

of the managers and staff. After that I sat with my staff and asked them to explain what they did. When I completed my first day, I remember thinking I was unsure whether I had made the correct decision accepting the job and did not have a clue what my function was within the company. I thought the organisation appeared very unprofessional, which was the opposite image I received at the interview. I found this quite demoralising.

As time went by, I eventually became experienced enough to do my job. I remained with the organisation and made an effort to do my job adequately and tried to listen and motivate my staff. However, I have now been with the organisation two years and have decided we are not compatible. I think my own work is not varied enough and quite often I become bored. I have tried several times to suggest ideas, but the sales director does not consider them. I feel part of the reason for this is lack of time; the other is because he is demotivated and uninterested.

I often think back to my interview and the way in which the job was described. The description of the role and the job I am doing now seem completely different. This has left me feeling misled and had I known the truth about the job I would not have accepted it in the first place. I feel as though the organisation has let me down. When I explained the situation to my sales director he said that 'some errors did occur', but unfortunately it is impracticable to make changes. This has made me feel even more frustrated.

At the interview I explained I was looking for an organisation where there would be an opportunity for promotion. At the time the sales director acknowledged this and said this would not be a problem. Within a couple of days I realised there was not an opportunity for promotion. The next step for me would be a directorship and since all the directors had been with the organisation for years, promotion seemed most unlikely. When I asked my sales director to explain what promotion prospects there were, 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. I think he said this to recruit a higher calibre of employee. Since I have worked for the organisation it has actually downsized and there is even less of a chance of promotion.

Although this story is told from the perspective of the successful applicant, the key event is the interviewer's over-optimistic assessment of the promotion opportunities: 'I said there would be an opportunity for promotion because I was hoping the organisation would grow and eventually there would be an opportunity.' As I read the story, I gained the sense that this selector did not

mean to misled Anne; he just got it wrong and should have been clear to her that this was conjecture. Regardless of whether it was deliberate deceit or not, its impact is great. Anne feels cheated and regrets accepting the offer of the job.

Interactions between selectors and applicants are very powerful in the way in which they influence the future psychological state of successful candidates. Often interviewers forget the impact of their words, especially if they are interviewing many people in the same day. Extracts from Anne's story reveal just how attentively interviewees listen to interviewers' words: 'He said that the company is a growing and dynamic one: "We believe in open communication and value people's opinion." This made me feel I really wanted to work for this organisation.' Two years on, she is able to recall quotes. In shaping Anne's state of mind, it does not matter whether these were the actual words spoken; these are the words she believes were said to her. They have shaped her expectations about the work and she feels let down when they have been shown to be false.

Interviewers easily forget just how attentively interviewees hang on their every word. The words and the way they are spoken are vital pieces of evidence on which applicants base their selection decisions. And when those decisions are to accept job offers, they are the vivid memories of the psychological contract that has been struck with the organisation. When this is breached, people are upset, feel let down and betrayed, may seek retribution and will think about leaving. They certainly will not be contented employees with their minds focused on work.

Wrapped up in all this is the responsibility of selectors towards applicants. Clearly it is unacceptable to lie to applicants. Most would accept that interviewers can be upbeat about work in the recruiting organisation, but when does a 'positive spin' become deceit? At what point do selectors cross the line and mislead applicants? Much depends on how you conceptualise applicants. Are they like ramblers out for a Sunday stroll who are responsible for their own conduct? Or are they akin to shoppers and should benefit from all the protection we afford retail purchasers? The answer lies in the incomplete nature of the information applicants have on which to make their decision. Unless they are internal applicants, they will know very little about the recruiting organisation, what the work will be like, how they will get on with the people and what the atmosphere will be like. This is why they are so attentive to every small piece of information they can glean from the selection process. These are signals about what the work will be like.

Ironically, in Anne's case the pleasantness of the process, the upbeat description of the promotional prospects and professional manner in which

she was handled all painted an attractive picture of the organisation that she bought into. Her own excitement prevented her from being more critical. And this draws us full circle to Tom's story, because the more desperate the applicants are, the less they will be able to make an informed decision. To my eyes, the more desperate the applicants are, the greater the selectors' responsibility to them.

THINKING ON

1. Do organisational selectors have a moral duty to recruit people from the ranks of the unemployed whenever possible?
2. Given a choice between two people with apparently equal knowledge and skills who both look like they will be motivated and fit in well, one of whom is unemployed and the other employed (but immediately available), who would you appoint? Why?
3. Attribution theory says that when we explain our own actions we over-emphasise environmental factors (e.g. things outside our control, things that happen to us, external pressures), whereas when we judge other people we over-emphasise personal factors (e.g. their personality, their values and their nature). For example, 'I have been working 12-hour days for the past month and I was unable to get the report finished because I was too tired' as opposed to 'he didn't get the report finished because he is lazy and didn't work hard enough'. Given that selectors have to make assessments of other people, what impact is created by this natural tendency to attribute causality to personal factors?
4. Is the selector's main responsibility to the organisation? Is the primary responsibility to recruit someone who has the knowledge, skills, abilities and other attributes to do the work well? How can the selector's other responsibilities be reconciled with this?
5. What responsibilities do selectors have to applicants?
6. What responsibilities do applicants have to selectors and recruiting organisations?

READING ON

The first couple of stories in this chapter focus on how people are attracted to jobs and how employers can tap into sources of labour. Currently, much of the attention of researchers is on the use of the Internet and other computerised methods to do two things: to make the application process easier; and to assess or screen people as they apply. There are many difficulties associated with the use of the Internet for processing people's applications. How do you verify identity? How do you ensure that people do not practise any screening tests you set them, perhaps using different names? According to Bartram (2000), problems like this are all solvable. However, his main solution – the use of test centres to supervise submissions – removes many of the benefits of letting people apply and be screened online from the comfort of their own homes.

As one might expect, studies that have been conducted on applicants' reactions to the use of technology have demonstrated that, generally, they are favourable. However, Anderson (2003) has criticised these studies for their over-reliance on graduate respondent pools, who are more likely to be accustomed to such methods than other types of applicants, and for their descriptive nature. Provocatively, he writes:

Should we be that surprised if applicants presented with better designed web sites react more positively to poorly designed ones? Or that reactions to computer-based and Internet-based tests are generally favourable if we limit our subject pool only to undergraduate students who have been brought up using computers as part of their everyday lives? Or that applicants prefer to sit Internet-based tests in the comfort of their own homes as opposed to having to attend an organisation's offices for group testing sessions?

(Anderson, 2003, p. 128)

Although the use of computers in personnel selection is still very much in its infancy, it is attracting an increasing amount of research attention. Computerised versions of paper-and-pencil tests have some clear advantages. The software can do the calculations and provide initial feedback instantly and it can tailor questions to applicants' responses. In addition, such tests reduce some of the administrative burden and they give the impression of professionalism. Reassuringly, van der Vijver and Harsveld (1994) found that computerised tests produced similar results to their paper-and-pencil counterparts, but

noted that although completion time was shorter, people were less accurate in their answers. For the latest information, I would direct you to the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Personnel Psychology* and the *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* for academic studies and to *Personnel Review* and *People Management* for more applied work in this area.

Shortlisting is one of those Cinderella subjects that has not attracted much research attention, which is a little surprising given that this is usually where the severest culling of applications occurs. Bright and his colleagues (Bright & Davies, 1999; Bright & Hutton, 2000) have looked at the use of curriculum vitae (CVs) in shortlisting and found that one error or misrepresentation is sufficient to reject an applicant. The other main stream of shortlisting research centres on the development of application forms that use biodata to help with the screening of applicants. This subject is well covered in Searle's book (2003), *Selection and Recruitment: A Critical Text*.

An excellent primer on attribution theory, showing how it can be applied to recruitment and selection, is a chapter by Herriot (1989) in Eder and Ferris's (1989) collection *The Employment Interview*, which contains a series of excellent reflections on selection interviews. Herriot's work is based on the work of Eiser (1986), which, although a little dated, is also recommended as a social psychology text.

Psychological contracts are strongly associated with the work of Rousseau. A good starting point to learn about this subject is her seminal book, *Psychological Contracts in Organizations* (1995). Any good organisational behaviour textbook that has been recently updated will discuss advances in this subject.

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