

Fit as a Recruitment and Selection Paradigm: A Realistic Job Preview Case Study

Jon Billsberry
The Open University

Introduction

This paper contains a 'real' story of how one firm selects people based on their fit. It comes from a large database of recruitment and selection stories, fifty of which I have published in a book entitled *Experiencing Recruitment and Selection* (Billsberry, 2007). The stories in this book came from students taking certificate in management courses at the Open University. They are the students' best recollection of events as they looked back on them.

The story in this paper was told by Emma (pseudonym). It relates her experience of being asked to come for a day's job trial prior to receiving a formal offer of a job. It is of interest here because it is a good example of fit being used as a recruitment and selection paradigm. It highlights some of the strengths and weaknesses of the approach.

Emma's Story

I had applied for the position of office manager with a PC software training company based in Silicon Valley, west of London. I was invited for an interview with the managing director (MD). The interview was different to others I had experienced, as it was quite relaxed and relatively informal. We discussed my previous jobs and what type of role I was looking for, but mainly we discussed my experiences of living in a foreign country; I had just returned from living in Sydney for two years.

The MD said he thought I would be perfect for the job, but, just to make sure, he wanted me to join the company for a one-day trial period. I was very surprised about this as I had never heard of anyone being asked to do this. My initial thought was: Is this his way of getting some work done without having to pay for a temp? He then explained that as the company was a franchise and not a large company, he had to 'ensure that all potential employees would fit in with the rest of the team'. Even though I had my reservations, I said yes. I liked the sound of the company: it was relatively new and I felt it would be a great opportunity for me to get in early and grow with the company.

The trial was arranged for the following day; I don't think I have ever been so nervous. My main concern was my potential colleagues. I knew that every time I said or did anything, they would be watching me. Was I capable of doing the job? Would I fit in with them? When I arrived everyone was already there waiting for me. The MD introduced me and gave me a brief description of who everyone was and what they did. The rest of the morning went by very quickly. I was given a brief induction and then set a few tasks to complete, which was their way of checking that I was up to the job.

To be honest, at the time I had mixed reactions. I was paranoid that I was going to make mistakes, but I was also excited about the prospect of getting the job. After lunch I was formally offered the position; it seemed everyone had really liked me and they wanted me put out of my misery. In the short term it meant I had a job that I was really looking forward to, and when I went into the office on my first day I felt like part of the team already. I also knew that I was liked by my new colleagues, which was a great morale booster. I also felt more relaxed asking questions.

Discussion

Emma's story illustrates the PO fit paradigm of recruitment and selection, although it is equally relevant to the social process paradigm. Emma's story is a particularly interesting example of the paradigm for several reasons. It shows how recruitment and selection can be done well. It highlights the interaction between person and environment. It illustrates the strength of the emotions during recruitment and selection and hints at some of the dangers in the paradigm.

The PO fit paradigm is concerned with the interaction of people and the environments they occupy and asserts that the 'fit' of people to their environments is the best predictor of their behaviour. This puts the selector under a tremendous onus, as this story illustrates. The selector has to ensure that the job is the right one for the applicant; the fact that they have applied is not sufficient evidence to indicate that they will be a 'fit' or that accepting the job is in their best interests. The infancy of this approach is demonstrated by the absence of tools and techniques to assess a person's fit (Karren & Graves, 1994). Probably without realising it, the MD has returned to the theoretical roots of PO fit. His solution appears the most natural and common way to assess an applicant's fit: to put them in the working environment and see how they interact with the people, events, tasks and so forth.

Emma's story reveals how difficult it is for applicants to make sensible, calm, rational decisions during recruitment and selection. For most, the prospect of a new job might be salvation from trying circumstances, a fresh start, an exciting opportunity or the culmination of many years' hard work. Consequently, they are likely to have invested a lot of emotion into their application and may start to treat the process as one in which they must 'succeed' in getting the job, rather than one in which they enter with a sense of inquiry. We see this in Emma's story when she says 'I don't think I have ever been so nervous'. In such circumstances, how can the applicant stand back from the process and coolly judge the suitability of this employer? Does this force selectors into paternalistic (possibly altruistic) roles, such as in this story, where they do what is the best interest of applicants even when this might mistakenly be thought to conflict with their own needs?

I have already mentioned that there is a shortage of tools and techniques to assess PO fit in real situations. The selector in this story opted for a realistic job preview, which places the applicant in the environment to allow both parties time to assess whether there is a 'fit'. Imagine what this must be like. How long does it take to settle? How long does it take for the nervousness and excitement to abate? How long does it take to find out what working in the organisation will really be like? Is a day long enough? A week? A month? Three months? A year? And this is a problem for PO fit approach

to recruitment and selection. Theoretically, it is very appealing. But in practice it is still in the cradle and barely able to conceptualise walking (Billsberry, 2006).

References

Billsberry, J. (2006) Towards a future where we select for fit. *People and Organisations at Work*, **13**, 10–11.

Billsberry, J. (2007) *Experiencing Recruitment and Selection*. Chichester: Wiley.

Karren, R. J. & Graves, L. M. (1994) 'Assessing person–organisation fit in personnel selection: Guidelines for future research', *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, **2**, 146–56.