
Employers' recruitment tools across Europe

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Introduction

While European jobs normally require a number of tools, the criteria by which they are judged differ. Students and business people interested in gaining international experience, as well as multinationals and executives who must recruit Europeans need to know these differences.

Throughout Europe, recruitment tools appear astonishingly similar. Despite the various application forms, the different ways in which selection interviews are conducted and the uses made of certain tests, what emerges is the attachment of these tools to the national cultures from which they issue (Tixier, 1994). It is the variety of these instruments and their use which this article intends to address.

Let us state also that although differences other than nationality affect the way in which résumés and letters of application are written, this article presents a cross-national comparison only.

The methodology of the investigation

To study recruitment tools in Western Europe, two recent research visits at a two-year interval in the early 1990s to the 14 countries under consideration were necessary (Tixier, 1992). These countries included the countries of the Economic Union (other than France), Switzerland, Sweden and Austria. For each country 25 interviews were conducted; and five were conducted in France. The individuals interviewed were mainly the managers of large headhunting networks and recruitment agencies, and the human resources' directors of large groups. To these main populations a few others had to be added: the general managers of French subsidiaries in Europe and of European subsidiaries in France. The services of embassies and the directors of MBA programmes also were solicited.

The interviews, which were qualitative and at first unstructured, became more and more structured when it became necessary to integrate the data sought in each of the countries. We were able either to consult or to obtain 100 job applications in each country, which allowed us to clarify information obtained orally from the specialists. Finally numerous works and documents written in the languages of the countries involved and intended to improve the prospects of those seeking managerial employment were consulted.

The main difficulty encountered was in obtaining a reflection of current practices rather than the proven methods that a recruiter *should* adopt. The

diversity of individuals interviewed allowed us to cover the recruitment tools used for both inexperienced and experienced, managers.

Among the latter, recruitment tools for senior executives (via direct approach) and lower echelon managers (newspaper advertisements) were covered. The quality of individuals interviewed helped us to define also the cultural variants of recruitment in each country well.

The employment application form, the selection interview as well as tests and graphology will be covered successively across Europe as they are the three main tools used by European recruiters.

The employment application form in Europe

The alternative to the CV in those countries where it is not the norm or an obligation is the employment application form. It is widespread in Ireland and in Great Britain, where 93 per cent of the companies use it while it is more rare in Denmark and Sweden. In other countries, like Germany, its use is not systematic, but these forms frequently are filled out by job seekers in Italy, Spain, The Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, Switzerland, Austria and Greece.

These employment applications often are more widespread in certain sectors than in others (for example in the banks in Luxemburg or the State sector in Sweden), or are reserved for young university graduates or middle managers, as in Italy. The application forms have various names depending on whether they come from a company, a university, or a recruitment agency.

In England, for example, there is the "standard application form" (SAF) which students use in about half the cases and which they obtain at the careers and appointments' services of their universities. In the other half of the cases, the company prefers the applicant to use its own version of the employment application or the "employer's application form" (EAF). The "standard introduction form" (SIF) is the version most commonly used by Irish recruiters (Shackleton and Newell, 1991). In certain countries, like Belgium, the employment application is often in English. With rare exceptions (Austria, Belgium) the applicant's photo appears on the application where it is also the norm to put it on a CV.

In certain countries, like Sweden, companies using employment application forms do not ask the applicant any open questions, and the applications are only simple administrative files. The reason is that open questions are considered best suited to face-to-face encounters, for example the interview.

In fact, it is forbidden in Sweden to retain certain qualitative information about an individual, even if he has given his permission (for example, questions about alcoholism, sexuality, etc.). It is illegal to store any evaluation about an individual in any form. Any person can consult, at any moment, what has been written about him. This information is in the public domain because existing files are accessible to a wide range of people.

Similarly, in Denmark a company manager is not in the habit of expressing his opinions about his professional plans or his personality in a document considered to be administrative in nature. Other countries like Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxemburg and Switzerland have such files, while the UK, Spain, The

Netherlands and Ireland use employment applications in which the questions sometimes require very candid answers: the type of career contemplated, goals and ambitions, main past successes, whether adequately qualified for the position coveted, the strengths and weaknesses of the applicant, motivation for advancement in the company, medium-term career development, challenges successfully met, etc.

In some countries the recruitment cultures have not stabilized and different approaches cohabit. In Greece, for example, while multinationals interview applicants in depth with many open questions, Greek companies typically ask only factual information about civil status, previous experience, etc. This same mix is found in Portugal.

These differences, some of which are legal in origin and concerned with the protection of persons, are found in some of the application questions about the applicant's agreement to take tests (Austria, The Netherlands, Portugal), employer verification of information furnished by the applicant, authorization to store certain information given by an applicant for future use (Portugal) or for a defined time period (The Netherlands). Afterwards applications can be destroyed (The Netherlands, Germany) or returned to the applicant (Germany).

The headings, which in other respects are typical for employment applications, can present certain specificities. The insistence on training history information, if only for the space provided for it in the application, is striking in Belgium, Luxemburg and Italy (where even the names of professors involved are requested in the application form). An insistence on professional experience is characteristic of the Spanish application form; the insistence on military service, in Greece; the insistence on surroundings and family history in Italy and, above all, Greece, but also in Belgium, Luxemburg and Switzerland.

Geographic origin holds particular importance in Belgium, Greece and Switzerland; the Germans, Spanish, Danes, Dutch and Austrians specifically ask about changes in residence; references are demanded practically everywhere in Europe. In the UK, Germany, Spain, The Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, Austria and Luxemburg application forms ask about hobbies and leisure activities, unlike the norms observed in CVs.

Certain countries (Switzerland, the UK) stress community spirit. In the UK, for example, applications request information about responsibilities exercised during studies (positions as "prefect", "form captain", "sports captain", etc.), as well as any club or volunteer activity demonstrating an interest for the surrounding community.

Finally, other headings are more specific to customs of certain countries. They concern mainly religion in Greece, Germany, Switzerland and Austria. This information is required, moreover, in CVs for tax reasons principally in Austria and Germany. Titles and publications form particular headings in German employment applications, while in Italy and Spain the mention of publications appears rather in the CVs of executives.

Finally, certain questions which are considered prurient or even illegal in some countries are found in certain applications, by way of example the applicant's financial situation (Germany, Austria), police record (The

Netherlands, Belgium, Austria), illnesses and pregnancies (Germany, Belgium, Luxemburg, Austria).

This examination of employment applications in Europe is interesting for two reasons. The information spontaneously offered by applicants in the CVs can be compared with the headings under which their potential employers ask them to give information. Employment applications are reflections also of legal systems and cultures, notably of the ideas that different countries have about the protection of persons in recruitment. The contradictions brought to light by comparisons between European countries' laws, customs, or conceptions thus make foreign judgements and logical constructs more relative.

The employment interview in Europe

Interview styles

Interview styles vary from one European country to another. The structured style is favoured in the UK, Scandinavia, Germany, Austria and Spain, while a non-structured style is preferred in Italy, Luxemburg, Portugal and Switzerland. Other countries say that they use a rather semi-structured style which tends towards one or other of the above styles. They are The Netherlands, Belgium and Greece:

- In the *UK*, the style of the employment interview is rather directive (Goodworth, 1979). This is the case in large companies like Grand Met and ICI where the interviews are very structured and very focused. The tendency towards directive interviews is strengthening as traditional companies use a semi-structured style, while the modern companies and banks are turning towards structured interviews accompanied by tests. Research has recently demonstrated the greater reliability of structured interviews in which the questions are related to duties.
- In *Ireland* the employment interview has the appearance of an informal conversation, but among professional recruiters it is very structured in its objectives. In Ireland and England, there is a real debate about interview styles and the validity of recruitment methods. All recruiters who follow the contributions of the research in this field have a tendency to orient themselves towards structured or semi-structured employment interviews. The other recruiters generally have a non-structured approach in interviews. Structured interviews are very friendly in their form at, but the recruiter expects answers to questions and precise information on which to base decisions. It is mainly the big companies which practise this form of interview.
- In *Austria*, the employment interview uses a style which goes from the semi-structured to the structured. The questions are very structured and all the points which the recruiter tries to elucidate are covered and verified. Some make use of the checklist, but discussion is open around each of the items.

- In *Germany*, the employment interview has a style which is more structured than it has in France (Frey, 1989; Friedrich, 1988 and 1989; Knebel, 1989; Lehmann, 1989; Wülfrath, 1989). If the conversation is open-ended, the recruiter is fond of precise questions; the applicant is thus guided. The interview is meticulous and the recruiter expects concrete answers to his series of questions. He shows much rigour in his approach and does not let the applicant speak as freely as does the French recruiter.
- In *Luxemburg*, the employment interview is conducted in a friendly tone and the recruiter originating from Luxemburg has a reputation for being respectful to the applicant. The foreign recruiter in Luxemburg tends to be more aggressive. Although the interview style is informal, an initial interview has many questions and relatively little real dialogue. The interview may have a structure from the professional recruiter's stance, but this structure is not always apparent to the applicant. Most generally, the interview style is relatively unstructured.
- In *Italy*, the employment interview is less formal than in France, as is the whole recruitment procedure (Aguer and Corouge-Guerreiro, 1990; Colbachini Conti, 1985). The Italian personnel manager has less impact on the decision than in France and therefore exercises less method in his recruitment. The interview in appearance is open, informal, flexible and non-structured. There are no particular schools of thought in Italy, and each recruiter has an individual style which can vary from one situation to another. There is nothing predetermined in the process.
- In *Portugal*, the employment interview style is largely unstructured, especially with individuals who have high professional status. Today, however, recruiters are oriented towards semi-structured interviews. A framework guides the recruiter, and a few key questions are systematically asked. The relationship is one of equality between the recruiter and the applicant, which in a period when or a region where there is limited unemployment, is a situation which puts the applicant more at ease.

The candidate-recruiter relationship

The relationship which is established at the interview between the recruiter and the candidate assumes varying degrees of importance depending on the country:

- In *Italy*, the quality of the contact established is a determinant because the interview is focused more on the individual than on his or her career. If the personal aspect is satisfactory, then the professional skills of the person are examined. Most recruiters confess that the emotional prevails over the rational. As one Milan recruiter has expressed the situation: "I can make him out; I like him; I want him".

- In *Spain* (Morgan, 1989) the employment interview accords a large space to the relationship which is established between the participants. Sometimes more importance is attached to the potential, loyalty, honesty and reliability of individuals than to their professional skills. Human chemistry can be more important than degrees. Personality, life-style, social circle, family background and professional contacts, therefore, play a big role in selection and Spanish recruiters are focused more readily on the individual than on his or her career.
- Similarly in *Austria*, individuals who inspire confidence are often chosen in preference to those who objectively represent better skills. Non-rational factors, therefore, play a significant role in the Austrian system.
- In *Luxemburg*, too, significant subjective assessments are considered important and are accepted because there exist probationary contracts. Therefore, in the typical labour market in Luxemburg, decisions are founded above all on the personal impression made by the applicants and on the reference coming from their previous employers. On the other hand, the recruitment of non-nationals tends to be more rigorously conducted.

Role of personality

The role of the relationship, of course, is linked to that of the personality in the recruitment process. It will not surprise anyone that the personality of the candidate plays an important role in Italy, Spain, Luxemburg, Greece and Austria, while in other countries its role is either secondary or less immediately recognized (Taillieu and Mooren, 1990):

- In *Spain* qualities of integrity and loyalty are appreciated as well as an attachment to familial values, which are seen to guarantee an interesting personality capable of investing himself/herself in the company (Nagore, 1988). If, today, such loyalty or these familial values are less important than before, they are replaced by a high regard for emotional stability.
- Moral values remain important in *Portugal*, as does socially acceptable behaviour: the sociability of the person, human relationships, the person's style, his/her personal commitment (*empehno*) – the internal energy which emanates from him/her – and emotional balance are aspects picked out and tested by recruiters.
- In *Austria* also, the personality plays a very important role in recruitment. The successful candidates in general have certain common characteristics: they present themselves well; they have good references; they sell themselves well; they are dynamic and seem to be very crafty, cunning, wily (resourcefulness is very important there).
- Personality and relationship-forming capacities are perhaps more important to recruiters in *Denmark* than they themselves are ready to admit. They prize references and recommendations in the selection process. They are aware that the personality often determines the result

and that it is a constant factor which does not change in the course of time, even if the manner in which it is evaluated differs from one recruiter to another.

- Similarly in *Greece*, where most recruiters agree in attaching equal weight to skills and to personality, the latter is felt to be very important. The underlying belief is that technical skills are acquired, while personality traits endure and no amount of training is likely to change them. Consequently, the personality sometimes plays a preponderant role.
- In *Belgium*, the interview was for a long time only factual, based on professional achievements to which the company attached the highest importance. Today, however, the interview style is changing and personality which was judged secondary until now, occupies and plays a bigger part. The qualitative – for example, a diplomatic sense which is essential in Belgium – and the understanding of informal social networks are gaining in importance.
- In *Ireland*, if competence is the prime selection criterion, the applicant's personality and aptitude to get along well with colleagues rank highly, as do a certain leadership quality; and a sense of humour is always appreciated.
- In *The Netherlands*, in addition to professional skills, personal qualities are appreciated. The qualities of leadership, conviction, persuasion and analytic ability are increasing in value. Communication, charisma and the ability to adapt to teamwork, or possibly of leading a team to achieve its goals are some of the demands of Dutch recruiters. They also like to see stability in applicants.
- In *Switzerland*, the first concern of the recruiter is to be assured that he has in front of him a professional whose competence is recognized. Another concern will be about the temperament of the applicant as he or she functions in the team into which he or she is to fit. Personality criteria, although secondary, are taken into consideration, notably in French-speaking Switzerland where adaptability counts more. But it is always in cases of applicants with equal skills that the criteria of personality are applied to decide them.
- In the *UK*, employment interviews were used for a long time to establish the technical competence of the applicants. Their objective is wider today, but the evaluation of personality remains secondary. The weight of competence dominates the other selection criteria and previously acquired experience, when it is not a first job, constitutes the essential agenda of the interview.
- Similarly, the *German* interview moves quickly to matters relating to the position and does not linger too long on the person. Personality factors – though considered important – tend to be dealt with only at the end of

the interview. Furthermore, they are variously interpreted. For example, on both sides, attention to detail is one characteristic sought by the recruitment interview in Germany. Unlike the situation in France, this trait will not be interpreted in Germany as a lack of flexibility or of a comprehensive perspective. The German applicant takes the time to answer questions and does so in a constructive manner. Indeed, in Germany, a manager is not recognized by his or her spontaneity, enthusiasm or expansive character.

- The *Danish* interview presents a clever balance between skills and personality. The Danes look for facts above all else. They are oriented towards tasks and technical competence. The recruiter wants to know about previous responsibilities, budgets managed and the number of subordinates the applicant supervised. The Danes are increasingly oriented towards results, particularly in the field of human resources.

Technical competence

Sweden and The Netherlands are among those countries which give considerable weight to technical competence of recruited executives. In Sweden, the professional aspects are approached very factually and it is important for an applicant to show how the job's requirements were attained during previously held positions. Experience plays a big part in the interview because in Sweden one is, above all, what one does.

In the Netherlands, for the same reasons, professional experience is prized over certain personality factors. Experience presents in effect less risk than to estimations of the potential of the applicant, or his or her aptitude to adapt to new duties.

This is the case also in Portugal and Spain. In Portugal, the technical competence and well-developed experience of the activity concerned are prized sometimes to the detriment of adaptability; this is especially characteristic of small companies. But more modern tendencies are in evidence, such as whether the applicant is multi-skilled and sensitive to the commercial aspects of all duties he or she is likely to perform. Similarly, in Spain, the technical aspect of the "job" matters above all else to the company head. If proof of expertise is absent, the applicant will have to prove his value by what he has done. Taking into account potential for adaptation to a new position for which the applicant may not have previous experience represents a big risk, and since potential is not testable it is not taken into account as a priority. Training in a precise field and practical experience in a professional field are preferred to a wide or generalist culture. Here, professional experience is preferred to certain personality traits, and also to certain types of training which are deemed too academic in character.

Taboo questions

Throughout Europe, certain questions are considered "taboo" and are rarely asked of the applicant. They are avoided and evaded. Sensitive subjects or the

reasons for not bringing them up have a common core throughout European countries. A few particulars can nevertheless be pointed out:

- Numerous observers remark the tendency in *Sweden*, including in private life, to avoid subjects which risk revealing disagreements between individuals, for example politics. These observers stress moreover the impact which this aversion to conflict has on recruitment: important questions to be asked of the applicant are often forgotten. Investigation is often insufficient; the motivations and real expectations, on both sides, are not sufficiently defined.
- In *Greece* the only sensitive subject seems to be politics because of the high rate of union membership among workers and the repeated strikes. Therefore, the subject is approached subtly and indirectly. Even if it is impossible to discriminate on this basis, the multinationals tend not to recruit members of a political party which might display its fanaticism; they prefer relatively conservative individuals. Nevertheless politics in Greece arouses fewer passions today, because a certain number of scandals have led to a certain wariness with respect to it.
- In *Portugal*, a rather tolerant country, some recruiters try nevertheless to know what the political opinions of applicants are. The fear of communist managers is lessening these days, even in the North of the country. In the same company it is possible to find managers of politically divergent opinions who work together on good terms. Politics is therefore no longer a taboo subject in recruitment.
- In *Belgium*, the internal linguistic diversity of the country, often linked to religious or political affiliation, do not affect recruitment because Belgium is a very tolerant country. In the past, the university attended or the newspaper in which the advertisement for the position was located were considered probable indications of the opinions or upbringing of the applicant. Today no quick deduction can be made, above all when the individual is looking for a job.
- If socially, no question seems actually taboo, recruiters in *Spain* appear to be reserved about personal subjects (health, religion, money, social class, politics, sports and family). These subjects would be judged inappropriate if they were suggested by an applicant at interview.
- In *Denmark*, any interference in the private life of an applicant is frowned on because there is a strong separation between private life and professional field. Certain subjects to do with religion, sexuality and alcohol are never brought up.
- In the *UK*, no subject is taboo, but recruiters avoid issues connected with discrimination. The following are covered by legislation: racial distinctions, nationality or ethnic origin (Race Relations Act, 1976), distinctions based on sex or marital status (Sex Discrimination Act, 1975). Other interdictions affect union membership because there no

longer exists a “closed shop” which requires a worker to belong to a union in order to be hired (Local Government Act, 1988). Finally, the Data Protection Act imposes the obligation that a company register with a court clerk the types of information on employees stored in a database. Questions concerning the private life of the applicant must have a direct relationship to the requirements of the position; information volunteered must not be used for discriminatory purposes. Questions about the applicant’s politics and religion are generally avoided at interview.

- In *Italy*, outside of politics and religion, the interview is free-ranging (a 1970 law forbids discussion of anything dealing with political convictions, beliefs and union membership), and personal questions about private life (family – except pregnancies – hobbies, tastes, etc.) are not avoided.

Finally, protection of individuals during the recruitment process is the object of numerous debates in the press and professional associations almost everywhere in Europe. Knowing the legislation of each country in this field, and an awareness of what is appropriate or not in open discussion, and the debates which animate the profession today, allows an interviewer to ask or to avoid a question in the full knowledge of the facts, so enabling a better appreciation of an applicant’s response, both for its content and its form.

What recruiters value

If the recruitment culture of each European country gives specific importance to each tool, what recruiters in these countries value when they choose a manager must also be taken into account. For certain countries, as we have seen, it is professional experience (the UK, Spain, Switzerland) or specialist training (Germany, Spain) rather than generalist training (France). Others attach importance to degrees, to training, even to titles (Spain, Germany, Belgium, Greece); still others are attracted by potential for adaptation (the UK, Sweden, France), capacities for innovation (Italy, Denmark, Greece, France), leadership qualities (the UK, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Ireland). These are many of the factors of which European applicants must be fully aware, in order to make their applications appear in the best possible light.

Tests and graphology in Europe

Tests are used in recruitment by all the European countries even if their use is uneven. Germany and the UK use these tests the most, followed by Ireland, Sweden, Austria, Belgium, The Netherlands, Denmark and Spain. Psychological tests are the most frequent, especially in Italy and Sweden, but intelligence tests are also used (e.g. in the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, The Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland, Sweden and Austria). Certain tests specific to certain professions are used, such as management and computers (in Ireland and Austria), sales (the Netherlands), and accounting and finance (in Spain).

Young university graduates and young managers take the most tests (notably in the UK, France and Denmark, but also in Ireland, Belgium, Spain

and Italy), but middle managers also take them (Spain, the UK, Luxemburg and Ireland). More rarely do top managers take tests, but in the UK, Spain and Ireland that is the case. Multinationals and large companies in general are the biggest users of these tests, but recruitment agencies and outside consultants, which use them a lot, are the originators of many known tests.

Assessment centres remain a specificity of large companies because of their cost. German and British firms make use of them, and the Danes, Dutch, Irish and Swiss do so as well. In the past seven or eight years they have become more numerous in Italy and they are developing today in Spain and in Portugal. They remain rare in Belgium, Luxemburg and Greece.

Only in Greece is the introduction of these tests a very recent phenomenon, and there they are treated with reservation. A good number of CEOs remain convinced that it is possible to recruit on the basis of training and experience and that personality does not need to be tested. Therefore, many recruiters use tests only occasionally. Conversely, the use of the tests is traditionally strong in the more introverted countries. A survey has shown that 50-60 per cent of human resources managers in Scandinavia believe that the tests are indispensable during the selection process. Therefore their use is intensifying in all the Nordic countries at the present time (Mercuri Urval Consultant, 1991).

Similarly in England, their use has considerably grown in the past few years to become one of the characteristics of selection methods of British managers: personality tests are used in 67 per cent of recruitments of managers and executives; and as tests of intellectual capacity they are used in 43 per cent of these same recruitments (Torrington and Hall, 1987). The methods used in the UK seem generally to be more scientifically validated than those used in France. French methods remain more intuitive and subject to interpretation. The best example in this regard remains that of graphology.

Graphology, which is widely used in France, is almost unknown in the UK. It is, furthermore, treated with suspicion in almost all European countries. Only some Swiss, Belgians, Spaniards, Italians and Germans make limited use of it. The companies using graphology are thus generally small and medium-sized firms (Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Germany). The sectors using it can be banking (The Netherlands), distribution and transport (the UK). Graphology is treated as suspect because its scientific validity has not been established among European recruiters; it can be used to remove doubts about an applicant or bring complementary clarification at the end of the process, but never to the exclusion of other assessments.

Conclusion

This study was carried out with the unification of Europe as well as the ever-increasing internationalization of trade in mind. Today, in 1996, such borders are open in most of these countries for more workers to cross and mobility will apply mainly to junior and senior managers. Whether the recruiting documents covered in this paper will become more homogenized remains to be seen. It will certainly take a long time and is likely to happen with the help of exchange programmes for graduates and of Eurosearch at a more senior level. Both levels

of management need to be aware of the variety of practices described above but it is their decision to tailor their behaviour to the expectations of the country to which they are applying. In a similar fashion, employers need to be more open-minded as to how recruiters across Europe make judgement on anyone's application.

The question may also be raised as to who will set the European standards for such documents in the future. At one point, the Americans influenced all European recruitment tools as did their management theories. But as applications reflect management values, they are bound to differ for some time until a European management style eventually emerges.

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