Recruitment and selection practices, person-brand fit and soft skills gaps in service

organizations: The benefits of institutionalized informality

Running title: Person-brand fit and soft skills gaps

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Introduction

Brand management is usually associated with how organizations present themselves to customers or develop product brands (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2002), but recent interest in employer branding draws attention to employees and potential recruits as important stakeholders (Gapp and Merrilees, 2006; Lievens et al., 2007; Van Hoye and Lievens, 2005). Identity-based brand management is suggested as essential if employees are to behave in ways that are consistent with a brand philosophy and remain committed to this brand (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). Within the HRM literature, research has shown employers' increasing emphasis on recruitment as a vehicle for building an employer brand (CIPD, 2007) and 'brand image' is regarded as part of a signaling process which informs potential employees of an organization's attributes and reputation (Cable and Turban, 2006; Lievens and Highhouse, 2003).

In this chapter, we focus on the hospitality industry, which is widely accepted to suffer from high levels of skills deficits and employee turnover, especially in the 'soft skills' that are essential for customer service. Within this sector, businesses often distinguish themselves through the creation of service brands. Contrasting two hotel establishments with distinct brand identities and different degrees of reported soft skills deficits (e.g. in social and self-presentational skills), we propose that recruitment and selection practices which lead to closer person-brand fit will result in fewer skills deficits. Based on evidence linking recruitment and selection strategies with person-organization fit, we argue that person-brand fit can also be shaped in these early stages of the developing employment relationship.

Theoretical argument: Soft skills deficits, recruitment and selection and 'fit' in the hospitality industry

A number of commentators have noted the shift from purely technical and cognitive notions of skill to include 'soft' interpersonal and social qualities (see for example Payne, 1999; Grugulis et al., 2004). These are especially important for customer-facing employees in interactive services, such as retail and hospitality (Korczynski, 2005). Indeed, research indicates that for customer-facing workers, social skills, the ability to deal with customers and self–presentation are the most important skills sought by employers in recruitment, rather than technical skills or work experience (Nickson et al., 2005).

Employers have consistently reported deficits in these soft skills (Baum and Odgers, 2001; Baum, 2002; Hurrell, 2009). The most commonly reported problems relate to skills gaps in current employees, although problems also exist in skills shortages in potential recruits. Within Scotland, the focus of the present study, nationally representative Employers' Skills Surveys conducted annually between 2002 and 2004, showed that 16-25 per cent of employers reported skills gaps in current employees, typically in soft skills areas such as oral communication, customer handling and team-working (Hurrell, 2009). The Scottish hospitality sector was disproportionately affected by these soft skills gaps (ibid).

The hospitality industry is notorious for its *ad hoc* approach to HRM as well as its persistent problems with poor image, high turnover and skills shortfalls (see for example Hoque, 2000). Although evidence of 'best practice' can be found in the hotel industry (*ibid*), informal or unreliable HR approaches – for instance, the reliance on

brief interviews, references or an 'arms and legs' approach to hiring – seem to dominate, especially amongst small, single establishment employers with limited resources (Lockyer and Scholarios, 2004). Other findings show that structured 'situational' interviews are at least espoused as an ideal tool for assessing customer service competencies (Brannan and Hawkins, 2006), while less prescriptive approaches argue that the HR requirements of the hotel industry depend on their service processes (Schneider and Bowen, 1993). Thus, selecting for service contexts may involve the matching of employee qualities with the expectations and needs of the customers in the targeted market (ibid). In such a differentiated model, the fit between the employee and the organization will be essential if the organization is to meet its service goals.

A person-organization fit perspective promotes effective communication of organizational attributes to job applicants to shape their perceived value congruence with the organization. Rather than emphasizing technical (or psychometric) qualities of recruitment and selection methods, the primary interest here is their social or interactive qualities (see for example, Herriot, 1989). In particular, some methods are thought to have 'socialization impact' (Anderson, 2001). The interview, for instance, allows two-way communication and a richer environment for both employer and candidate to establish congruence in job expectations. Work sample tests or job simulations are perceived by candidates as being salient, providing realistic job previews and amongst the fairest methods of assessment (Schuler, 1993; Anderson and Witvliet, 2008). Such methods are, therefore, more likely to result in positive evaluations of the employer, and stronger commitment to the recruitment process.

Pre-entry experiences thus build relationships between the organization and future employees. Early interactions shape individuals' identification with the employer,

job and whether to remain with the hiring process. Schneider et al.'s (1995) attraction-selection-attrition model, for example, indicates how individuals self-select out of recruitment processes, or later the organization, if they believe it does not match their values or expectations. This perspective seems particularly apt for describing a value-based relationship based on a brand philosophy. Moreover, this emphasis on person-organization fit is appropriate for understanding the high levels of skills deficits and turnover that have plagued hospitality establishments. Methods which allow both parties to establish 'fit' will lead to employees who are more likely to be satisfied in their jobs, more committed to the goals (or brand) of the organization, and less likely to leave (Derous and de Witte, 2001; Schneider, et al, 1995).

Conceiving the process in this way provides considerable practical benefit for both parties. Applicants are able to make informed decisions about whether to remain within the selection processes and subsequently join and remain with the organization. For service establishments, success may depend on building and maintaining a strong employer brand. Distinctive branding has been proposed as a vehicle for dealing with competitive labour markets and attracting and retaining talent in service-based organizations (e.g. De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2003; Knox and Freeman, 2006). Burmann and Zeplin's (2005) institutionalized approach to 'internal brand management', so called because it is strategically recognized and encouraged by senior management, draws from organizational behaviour concepts in emphasizing the importance of brand citizenship behaviours and brand commitment amongst employees, especially within service organizations. These behaviours and attitudes are developed through brand-centred human resource activities, communication and leadership, including recruitment and selection criteria that encourage person-brand fit.

Although brand management is not our main focus here, selecting employees who are consistent with the brand and aesthetic of the organization may help employers to market themselves and provide consistent service encounters (Witz et al., 2003; Hancock and Tyler, 2007). We take this notion further by proposing that some recruitment and selection practices will be more successful than others in achieving fit between employees and the brand, and that this will have implications for skill match and turnover.

In order to develop the idea of how recruitment and selection practices may facilitate person-brand fit and subsequently reduce skills deficits, we chose to contrast two hotels of comparable size and labour market, but different reported levels of recruitment and retention problems; i.e. one hotel suffered from high levels of turnover and skills deficits while the other reported considerably fewer problems with these issues. Our specific interest was in their distinct service brands, the recruitment and selection strategies they used to align employees to this brand and whether this could be associated with their contrasting positions. The study, thus, had four objectives: (1) to examine managers' perceptions of soft skills deficits in each of the case study hotels; (2) to identify the service brands of each establishment; (3) to explore the relationship between the recruitment and selection of employees and the brands of each establishment; and (4) to determine whether any relationship found in (3) can be used to explain establishments' experiences of soft skills deficits.

Methodology

Futureskills Scotland's Scottish Employers Skills Survey (ESS) series shows that the hotel and restaurants sub-sector is the worst affected by soft skills deficits (Hurrell, 2009). For this reason, the present study focused on two hotel establishments chosen from respondents to the 2004 Scottish ESS; one (Fontainebleau) had reported soft skills deficits while the other (Oxygen) had not. This within-industry comparison allowed determination of whether the types of HR practices in place affected soft skills deficits. We focused only on establishments employing 100 or more and who were parts of multi-site operations as these are more likely to have formalized HR practices (Cully et al., 1999). Fontainebleau employed approximately 130 staff, and Oxygen 220 staff. Both hotels were drawn from the same labour market (Glasgow) in order to try and minimize potential variation in labour supply and both were part of prestigious international hotel chains catering for the mid-high end of the market. Oxygen was a five star hotel and Fontainebleau four star. Although both catered for the business and leisure markets, Oxygen tended to emphasize business and conference trade and Fontainebleau the leisure market and large events such as weddings and parties.

The majority of staff in each hotel was employed in Food and Beverage (F and B), events (Meetings and Events (M and E) in Oxygen and Conference and Banqueting (C and B) in Fontainebleau), Housekeeping, Front Office (reception) and Kitchen departments. In both hotels, the F and B and events staff were the largest employee group accounting for approximately 40 per cent of Fontainebleau's staff and 53 per cent of Oxygen's. The majority of employees in each hotel were part-time – approximately 62 per cent in Fontainebleau and 65 per cent in Oxygen, with such staff typically employed in F and B, events and Front Office.

Employee and management interviews and employee focus groups were used. Five managers were interviewed in Fontainebleau and six in Oxygen. The Food and Beverage Managers (FBM), Front Office Managers (FOM), Head Chefs (HC) and HR representatives (The HR Coordinator (HRC) in Fontainebleau and People Development Manager (PDM) in Oxygen) were interviewed in both hotels. In addition, Oxygen's Head Housekeeper (HH) was also interviewed, with Fontainebleau's HH unable to give an interview. Oxygen's Deputy General Manager (DGM) and a second HRC, who joined Fontainebleau during the study, were interviewed regarding the skills of other managers in the hotel. Interview questions addressed service requirements (and relatedly the brand); which skills were important in selecting employees; whether skills deficits existed; levels of turnover; and recruitment and selection processes. HR representatives were asked to consider all employees within each establishment, while line managers were asked only about employees they directly managed.

Seven interviews with customer-facing employees were conducted in Fontainebleau. Four individual interviews and a focus group of eight employees were conducted in Oxygen. The interview and focus group respondents included male and female, full- and part-time and UK and non-UK staff. Questions included their experiences of recruitment and selection and what they believed management were looking for in terms of customer service and brand representation.

Analysis and discussion

Skills deficits and turnover

Consistent with the 2004 Scottish ESS, Fontainebleau managers reported more problems with soft skills deficits than their Oxygen counterparts. Fontainebleau's managers reported soft skills shortages during recruitment ('skills shortage vacancies') in night staff, customer-facing breakfast staff, reception staff, and Chefs in customer handling and communication skills. Only the FBM reported no problems with skills shortages of any kind. In terms of soft skills gaps (lack of proficiency in current staff), the FOM reported these in four of the seven reception staff, especially in customer handling. The HC reported that two of his eight Chefs had soft skills gaps in oral communication, team working and customer handling. The FBM believed that 25 per cent of his front-line staff in waiting and bar jobs had soft skills gaps in customer handling and team working, whilst two F and B unit managers had soft skills gaps in communication and leadership. Customer service and team-working skills gaps were also reported by the HRC in approximately 30 per cent of Elementary staff (including F and B, C and B, Housekeeping and support positions in the kitchen). Even the hotel's senior management team was reported by both HRCs to lack oral communication and leadership skills. Although some skills gaps were in new employees who had not completed training, many employees with skills gaps had been in the organization longer. Some managers did report technical skills gaps alongside soft skills gaps (for example strategic planning in managers and practical skills in chefs) but these were considerably less of a problem and outside the focus of this chapter.

Fewer Oxygen managers reported soft skill shortages but these were reported in the largest employee group, F and B, in contrast to Fontainebleau. The PDM reported skill shortages for a maintenance position, whilst the Food and Beverage Manager (FBM) reported some difficulties finding candidates with the requisite customer

handling, self-presentation and communication skills. He believed these shortages were because Oxygen was very 'picky' during selection.

When examining soft skills *gaps*, however, Oxygen managers reported higher levels of overall staff proficiency. The HC reported skills gaps in approximately 20 per cent of chefs and 40 per cent of kitchen stewards (porters) some of which were in oral communication, and the DGM reported that 20 per cent of the 21 managers had skills gaps, some of which were in soft skills. In Oxygen there were more technical skills gaps reported than soft (in similar areas to Fontainebleau above) although these remained rare. There were thus some isolated soft skills gaps in Oxygen, but considerably fewer than in Fontainebleau.

Fontainebleau had an overall staff turnover rate of 75 per cent in the previous year compared to Oxygen's 42 per cent. Turnover was particularly high amongst part-time staff with the rate in Fontainebleau twice the average for the establishment as a whole. In Oxygen 90 per cent of replacement demand generated by turnover was for part-time positions.

The service brands

Oxygen: the 'style' hotel

Oxygen had a clear service philosophy; 'nae bother' which was, covered extensively during induction and re-communicated through annual training events, as well as permeating the organization's culture. When discussing 'nae bother' respondents stated that Oxygen was a very 'informal', 'young', 'fresh' and 'stylish' hotel. Indeed the hotel

itself had minimalist, chrome and leather décor with modern art throughout. The building was designed specifically for Oxygen and had won style and architecture awards. Oxygen maintained the 'nae bother' approach to customer service through genuine friendliness on the part of the employees rather than overtly–prescribed brand standards. Employees were encouraged to be polite yet informal with guests, for example calling them by their first names wherever possible rather than using surnames or 'sirring' and 'maddaming' guests.

A further distinctive aspect of Oxygen's approach to customer service was the requirement for 'style' in terms of dress, appearance, speech and deportment, summarized by the DGM as 'polish'. All respondents with the exception of the HH reported the importance of 'style' and self-presentation for Oxygen's employees. Whilst the requirement was not for being good looking *per se*, focus group respondents stated that Oxygen employees needed to be 'students', 'funky', 'friendly' and 'individual'. Although employees had a uniform (designed by Paul Smith) they were allowed bodily and uniform adornments, 'crazy' hairstyles (Focus group respondent 6) and facial hair as long as these were viewed as 'stylish' and consistent with health and safety legislation and the Oxygen brand:

> Facial piercings we're very liberal on. We've had people with their eyebrows pierced…some people with their nose pierced, some people with strange parts of their ears…pierced.….Girls, I don't care if they've got red, blue and green in their hair as long as it's not over the top (FBM, Oxygen).

The FBM stated that he had only needed to speak to someone seriously about appearance once in four years. This employee had grown a dark goatee beard that clashed with his bleached blonde hair making him look 'more like an idiot than anything' and thus inconsistent with Oxygen's brand. The employees reinforced the integrity of this fit between employees' appearance and Oxygen's brand.

> I am! [an essential part of the brand] [All start laughing] It's just you enjoy working here, because you know what the hotel is all about and what the image is so you can be confident about representing it. Staff complement the hotel. [All indicate agreement] (Oxygen focus group respondent 6).

> You have got that whole lively look of the building. It wouldn't look as good if you didn't have the staff there giving the same impression. (Oxygen focus group respondent 8).

Fontainebleau: tradition and formality

Fontainebleau's service encounter was dictated by exacting and prescribed brand standards stipulating the exact steps and stages that had to be engaged in for each service encounter. Management and employees characterized Fontainebleau's service as 'formal', 'traditional' and 'professional', in keeping with its long established reputation as one of the world's leading hotel brands. The décor of Fontainebleau also appeared to reflect this tradition and formality; furniture and fittings in the hotel were highly opulent and grandiose with classical art prints displayed throughout. Employees were expected

to call guests by their title and surname or else 'sir' and 'madam'. The FBM did note, however, that there was a requirement for a level of erudition when selecting employees for customer-facing positions as: 'you'd be looking for…whether that person's bright, articulate….Whether they've got a bit of…spark.'

Fontainebleau's appearance policy was more prescribed than Oxygen's and provides further evidence of its brand. Unlike Oxygen, there was no mention of style, only that employees were expected to be polite, clean and tidy. Staff uniforms were purchased from an industry clothing supplier and no personalization was allowed. The Meeting and Events employees referred to these generic uniforms as hot, restrictive, uncomfortable and poorly designed. Strict guidelines also existed regarding hair length and style, an absence of facial hair and visible tattoos and the fact that only one pair of earrings and a wedding ring could be worn as jewellery.

Alignment of recruitment and selection with the brand

The hotels used a similar range of recruitment methods for front line positions - internal advertising throughout sister hotels; the Job Centre; a recruitment website (S1 jobs); adverts in schools colleges and universities; informal drop-ins; newspaper adverts; referrals from current staff; agencies; and adverts in a trade publication ('The Caterer'). For more senior positions, specialized hospitality recruitment websites were also used, although many supervisory and managerial positions were filled internally.

Oxygen's approach, in addition to using conventional methods, aimed to attract candidates who fit their service brand. For example, university careers services were reported as the most extensively used method by the PDM and FBM as students were

seen to epitomize Oxygen's style of service. Although Fontainebleau also used employee referrals – the original HRC, for example, believed this fostered a 'happy' environment and better teamwork – this practice was extensively relied upon in Oxygen and aligned to the brand. The Oxygen focus group respondents, for example, believed that the M and E department, in particular, was populated by 'friends of friends of friends!' who tended to be '(the) same (as us) and the right kind of person' (Focus group respondent 5). Even Oxygen's local recruitment literature emphasized the fit between employees and the hotel. One advert, for example, gave a picture of the inside of the hotel alongside words such as 'distinctive', 'unmistakable, and 'unique' before adding 'but enough about you' and then describing what Oxygen offered to employees. This advert thus highlighted the importance of a fit between new recruits and the hotel's brand. Indeed a campaign was also run at the same time, using similar wording, but targeted at guests. There was no evidence of Fontainebleau emphasizing style in this manner.

In both hotels it was soft skills that were the main focus at the point of selection especially in terms of the ability to interact with and deal with others. Only 'back of house' functions, such as junior kitchen positions, placed less emphasis on soft skills and more on 'sound character', experience or technical skill (Head Chefs). For front-line staff, managers emphasized the importance of 'personality' and how this was used in the form of interpersonal skills. As stated by Fontainebleau's FOM: 'From a personality you can find out if they're bubbly, they're cheery… obviously if they're outgoing and whatever you know they're going to be able to deal with a guest, compared to someone that's really shy and withdrawn.'

Contrasts between the two hotels however emerged when managers were asked to elaborate on skills demand. Fontainebleau managers emphasized technical and practical skills, 'common sense' and/or work experience in addition to 'personality', especially for managers and senior kitchen positions. For entry-level staff, the HRC noted that applicants were often apathetic, appearing that they did not actually want the job, although this was not so much of a problem for part-time jobs that were typically filled by enthusiastic students. A bundle of characteristics indicating reliability and a work ethic were identified. The FBM stated that in selection he asked himself: 'Does it look like this person could hold down a job or does this person have an active life. Is the CV well written? What were the reasons for the people having left their last job? Are they potential trouble makers…?'

Fontainebleau's HC also brought up the issue of reliability for entry-level staff but appeared to go beyond a work ethic, looking for something bordering on obedience. Acknowledging that many jobs were not especially stimulating, especially for Kitchen Porters, he often needed someone to 'turn up and do the job reliably.' Somewhat tongue in cheek, he commented that he was looking for 'eyes open, ears open, mouth shut' when selecting apprentices.

A final factor that managers in Fontainebleau considered when selecting front line staff was the degree to which the individual would fit with the current team on an interpersonal level. The original HRC, for example, stated that one of the most important things in the hotel was that management had done their best to foster 'a happy place to work' and so it was important that everyone 'got on'.

In Oxygen, the emphasis on *particular* soft skills when selecting front-line employees was much more evident, even in 'back of house' functions. The FBM

emphasized that the main purpose of the interview was the identification of soft skills. In agreement, the FOM added that he was also looking for 'confidence and resilience' for working on the front desk. Both the PDM and FBM noted the manner in which applicants greeted them in interviews.

I just like them to kind of look me in the eye when they're speaking to me, maybe just a wee bit of a smile. And if they try and spark a conversation while you're speaking to them, you're like daddy-o … you're the one for me … (FBM, Oxygen).

For managers, as in Fontainebleau, there were additional requirements for experience and technical skills, such as forward planning, forecasting and financial management; but, soft skills and customer handling were viewed as essential for all senior managers.

Overall, Oxygen's management was looking for a particular manifestation of soft skills. They placed a strong emphasis on articulation, the appearance and 'style' of customer-facing employees and also a sense of 'warmth' and 'genuineness' that fit with the service product of the hotel: 'Self-presentation is particularly important to us here just because of the product we have in the hotel… It's very modern and it's sleek. It's very stylish and it's very attractive in the most parts, depending on your taste obviously' (FBM, Oxygen).

Selection methods

In operationalizing selection requirements, Fontainebleau's HR managers described a strategy that aimed to replace indiscriminate hiring with greater structure and formalization: 'Some of the managers would recruit…based on the fact that 'OK that person's willing to do the job and not necessarily concerned with what skills they have' (HRC1, Fontainebleau).

Two interviews, one with HR and one with the prospective line manager, had been introduced for entry-level positions. For managerial positions, further interviews were required, as well as personality tests, assessment centres and occasionally presentations. The interviews themselves used competency-based questions with standard rating forms for each job. Conference and Banqueting (C and B) casuals summed up their experience of a competency-based interview: 'All the questions were geared around if you were placed in a work situation within like what could happen in a hotel, how you would react to it. Like a complaining customer or a dissatisfied guest or something' (C and B employee 1).

The HR interview reportedly picked up on any gaps from the line manager's interview and expanded upon information provided on the candidate's application form or CV. The establishment had recently invested considerable resources in training managers so interviews were standardized for each position. For more senior positions the second interview concerned more strategic matters such as profit maximization. For the most senior positions further interviews with the GM and/or area manager was informal and used as a 'quality check'.

The extent to which managers followed the recommended approach in Fontainebleau varied. For outlet managers (such as the bar and restaurant) both interviews were conducted. The FBM, however, acknowledged that for front-line staff

only the line manager interview was used. Although he reported this *did* follow the competency-based format, his interest was more on candidates' *willingness* to do the job as highlighted when interrogating skills demand. Notably, this manager also reported skills gaps in around a quarter of his front-line employees. Employees in Food and Beverages departments, apart from one member of (Polish) waiting staff where this was to confirm she had the right documents, confirmed that they had received only one interview. The second interview for the Polish waitress was thus a legal check rather than an attempt to engage in more systematic selection. Only the Receptionist reported having more than one person present at her interview. Three employees described unstructured interviews (two waiting staff and one C and B casual) - 'he [the restaurant manager] was quite willing to take me on as long as I was happy with what he was offering [in terms of hours and pay]' (Waiting staff 1). The second member of waiting staff believed that *anyone* would have been hired and that the interviewing manager was 'just looking for a pair of hands!' Consistent with the referral approach, the C and B employee who had been recommended by his sister's friend noted the manager's comment, "I have to give you an interview for the record".

> My interview was more of a chat really, because the girl [who had referred him] was my sister's friend and she worked in banqueting …so she just said, "Yes. He's a good worker" and stuff. … and he's [the C and B manager] like, "you've basically got the job then" (C and B employee 4).

It must be noted, however, that employees believed that the selection process had prepared them for organizational life and that few 'nasty surprises' were apparent

after joining. Even where managers may not have acted selectively, employees believed that they were given appropriate and relevant information about the organization and their jobs.

Oxygen's policy was also that all candidates should have at least two interviews with HR and the prospective line manager, although once again the employees did not confirm this. What emerged from Oxygen managers and employees, though, were additional methods geared towards a two-way exchange between department managers and the hotel on one side, and candidates on the other. Housekeeping and kitchen candidates were given a work trial whilst anyone applying for front-office positions had to be seen by the Hotel's General Manager (GM) or DGM to ensure that they would be suitable brand representatives. For management and some supervisory positions (depending on the line manager's discretion) psychometric tests or presentations were also used. A final stage in which all interviewees participated was a tour of the establishment during which they were given the chance to ask their own questions and discuss Oxygen with the interviewer. Housekeeping trials were also accompanied by lunch and a further informal chat to assess candidates' views of the job.

Interviews in Oxygen were deliberately kept informal, although there were rating forms to be completed so that managers covered core areas. The FOM believed that hypothetical competency-based questions were not useful as 'anyone can lie at interview' and he preferred to use the time to get to know the applicant and assess their interpersonal skills.

According to Oxygen's PDM, the interview was used to learn about the individual and gauge relevant work or social experiences. All managers confirmed this. The FOM and FBM gave examples of interview topics: work and non-work activities

and interests; asking applicants to tell the interviewer about themselves; qualifications; what they are doing at university and why they went to university (if applicable); why they wanted to work in the hotel; what they were planning to do over their holidays; and whether they wanted to go travelling.

The interview was viewed as a two-way process, intended to establish what candidates expected from the job and whether this '…married up with reality' (FOM; PDM). This was also essential for the HH who believed that the main purpose of the post work-trial chat was to see how the applicant had enjoyed their experience and whether they had any concerns or questions. The FOM found the tour of the establishment very effective for assessing the reality of expectations that the applicant had about the job. Employees agreed that their interviews had been 'much less formal' than they had expected (FO and M and E employees). One interview described lasted 'about 5 minutes', but this employee had also already had two trial shifts, which she believed had been the main hiring method. Another employee typified Oxygen's approach to establishing a positive image during these early encounters with employees: 'My first contact with the hotel was a very positive impression. Actually I had another job as well which I'd got already and I never went back to it; my first impression about Oxygen was really, really positive and it was through the interview' (FO employee).

Class and gender implications

Given the above findings on selection, Oxygen managers appeared to be looking for a certain style of speech and deportment, which may be seen as reflecting 'middle class' socialization. The FOM, for example, stated a problem with applicants who spoke 'very

Glasgow', whilst the PDM believed that, as many of the hotel's business guests were middle class, those from commensurate backgrounds found it easier to interact with them. Although managers emphasized that employees from any class background would be hired if they showed the correct manifestation of interpersonal skills for Oxygen's brand, the implied association of the brand with being middle class, in part to mirror customer requirements, was apparent.

> I know I sound like somebody from Hitler Youth, but yes I do [think social background matters]…Do you know, unless people are polished there is no hope for them? And yes we'll employ them in back of house areas, but then they're trapped, and they're not trapped because they're not capable, they're trapped because they're not articulate (DGM - Oxygen).

The focus group employees were also aware of this requirement for 'middle classness'. This was revealed in the following discussion about the hiring of those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, referred to colloquially in Glasgow as 'neds' (or non-educated delinquents) for front office 'one touch service'.

> Respondent 6 It's [the service style] how well you speak and clarity. It's really important because that's how you come across to the guest.
>
> Respondent 4 You're not going to hire a ned for One Touch Service!
>
> Respondent 6 [Laughing] I know, imagine!
>
> Respondent 4 [Putting on a strong Glasgow accent] Awrite big man, how's it

going?! [Group laughs] One Touch Tam here [1]! [Group

laughter continues]

Respondent 7 One Touch Tam! It would be bad!

Respondent 3 It would be awful!

Oxygen's intentional recruitment of students and, in the words of one focus

group respondent, those who were 'beautifully educated', also reflects an indirect

advantage for those from middle class backgrounds (see for example Heckman, 2000).

Indeed, when discussing the requirement for a certain demographic, the PDM made

explicit reference to a Glasgow private school where students tended to be highly

eloquent and 'super confident', and could thus interact with middle class customers.

In Fontainebleau, the association of social background and brand image was not

apparent. Apart from one Conference and Banqueting respondent mentioning that

Fontainebleau probably would not employ a 'ned off the street', none of the respondents

mentioned the issue of social background. That is not to say however that eloquence

was completely unimportant in Fontainebleau, as identified by the FBMs requirement

for those who were bright, articulate and possessing 'spark' above.

Gender was not explicitly associated with possession of soft skills in either of

the hotels and was raised only with respect to certain aspects of grooming and health

and safety in Oxygen - the FBM's references to girls' hair colouring (see quote above)

and how they could not wear open-toed shoes for safety reasons. The only indirect

evidence that gender may have played a part in selection processes came in a guarded

statement from Oxygen's DGM. He reported that whilst he did not believe it mattered

whether Oxygen's employees were 'stick insect blondes' if they had the appropriate soft

skills, he had 'seen some evidence' that other managers may have focused on certain 'aesthetic aspects'. Although this one guarded statement may reveal little, it is worth noting that this was a senior manager's observation and some Oxygen managers may have interpreted the hotel's brand requirements or 'aesthetic' in gender-specific terms.

Conclusions

The more 'traditional' hotel, Fontainebleau, suffered more from employee soft skills deficits than the 'style' hotel Oxygen, despite operating in a similar industry context and labour market. Our aim was to link these different positions firstly, to a distinct brand identity within each hotel, and secondly, to different approaches to staffing. Our evidence suggests that these hotels' contrasting approaches to recruitment and selection, with Oxygen adopting hiring practices that allowed it to achieve 'fit' with their brand image, at least partially, explain this variation in soft skills deficits. Employees' identification with 'the brand' was shown to begin even before they entered the organization, cultivated by a two-way exchange relationship with the hotel during the hiring process. In what might be referred to as a social-strategic approach to recruitment and selection – named after two of Iles' (1999) distinct staffing paradigms - Oxygen achieved what is more widely referred to as person-organization fit, where the soft skills of those who were eventually hired were more likely to match both managers' expectations and applicants' own expectations of the job. These findings have implications most obviously for what is to be considered 'best practice' in the hospitality context, keeping in mind the need to find strategies for dealing with the

industry's persistently high turnover and skills deficits. We must also, however, consider the negative implications of a person-brand fit approach to selection.

'Best practice' HRM in hotels is generally thought to be exemplified by more structured approaches which eliminate managerial inconsistency and *ad hoc* decision making, and focus on aligning practice with employee competencies that can deliver high performance (Hoque, 2000). Fontainebleau's *stated* policy appears consistent with this 'best practice' approach with its espoused service standards and structured hiring practices. In reality, however the implementation of the policy was inconsistent and did not always adhere to conventional notions of best practice. There was evidence, especially for Food and Beverage positions, that managers were not hiring selectively or strategically on the basis of skills and the candidate's fit with either the job or the organization. Line managers often departed from the stated, formal, competency-based policy, appearing to be more concerned with a person's willingness to do the job. They were even happy to accept the word of a current employee, alone, on an applicant's suitability. Although informal recruitment such as employee referrals may facilitate person-organization fit, particularly in hospitality contexts (Lockyer and Scholarios, 2004) or as part of a strategic response to difficult labour market conditions (Klehe, 2004), in this hotel, there appeared to be no consistent attempt to use these methods to address strategic goals or skills gaps. An 'arms and legs' approach to hiring was thus apparent even in this large multinational organization, where greater standardization is to be expected.

In Oxygen, there was greater selectivity of front-line employees with managers more consistently focusing on interpersonal and self-presentation skills and the extent to which these skills were appropriate for the brand. Informality appeared here too - for

instance, managers used interview 'chats' as a way of establishing the suitability of employees' skills. It must be noted that Oxygen managers also appeared to depart from the hotel's two-interview policy although they appeared to be behaving strategically and selectively. The use of managers to identify person-organization fit through the interview process has been highlighted before (see for example Brannan and Hawkins, 2006; Moscosco, 2000) but in Oxygen this concept was extended to consideration of fit with the overall hotel brand.

As well as managers' apparent consistency in selecting according to a strategic brand identity, a further distinctive feature of Oxygen's selection process was its acknowledgement of applicant experiences in the two-way relationship building. As part of the apparent 'informality', applicants themselves could establish whether they wanted to work for Oxygen and 'fit' its style requirements, for example through informal tours of the establishment. Practices that allow employee agency in selection decisions have been acknowledged before as part of attraction-based recruitment (Rynes, 1991; Saks, 2005). Through informal events and work trials, it appears that Oxygen's applicants were able to gather important information about the organization's symbolic attributes, such as its brand or 'personality', allowing a self-assessment of fit (Highhouse, et al., 2007). This partially reflects work conducted in the call centre industry by Brannan and Hawkins (2006) where introduction of the organizational culture through informal selection events was seen as developing pre-entry affective commitment to the organization. Oxygen employees were highly aware of the brand, their fit with the brand and the role that they played in personifying this brand through their soft skills, indicating brand commitment and identification (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). It is also possible that they perceived the organization as 'honest' in not

attempting to project an unrealistic image of the work itself, and this enhanced applicants' feelings of being fairly treated (Anderson and Witvliet, 2008).

Fontainebleau's employees also appeared to believe that the organization had been honest to them during the selection process. Although Fontainebleau's selection process did not, therefore, appear to consider brand communication it did at least seek to try and outline the general expectations of the job. These apparently transparent approaches are preferable to the use of 'impression management' techniques that may not always remain true to the organizational reality, potentially leading to dissonance and attrition amongst employees (Brannan and Hawkins, 2006).

There did, however, appear to be greater success at avoiding attrition in Oxygen despite Fontainebleau's transparency. Oxygen's employees appeared to have developed a positive image of the organization during the recruitment stage, and were attracted to what they saw of the work environment and style of the hotel, which they saw as compatible with their personal characteristics and values. Indeed Oxygen's recruitment literature emphasized this fit between employees and the hotel's brand. This appeared to have contributed to their decisions to join the organization, and although it was not possible to evaluate this here, could explain the lower levels of turnover (Derous and de Witte, 2001; Schneider, et al., 1995). Oxygen's selection process can be represented as 'institutionalized informality', with a combination of strategic direction and two-way informal communication acknowledging applicants' self-selection decisions as an essential and formalized part of the organization's HR policy.

There is, however, a caveat to any recommendation that deviates from the conventional notion of 'best practice' as standardization and objectivity. Selecting for 'fit' may lead to capricious decisions on the basis of 'similar to me' evaluations or

unintentional exclusion of some applicant groups. Some of the evidence gathered from Oxygen suggests that the alignment of selection practices around a shared perception of brand characteristics may have pernicious implications for the selection of those from certain class backgrounds. Those operating in the hospitality industry and seeking to differentiate themselves by offering a certain 'style' in their service may be privileging those from the middle class (see Nickson et al. 2003; Nickson and Warhurst, 2006).

In terms of potential gender issues Hancock and Tyler (2007) discuss how employers may communicate their image and brand through the embodiment of employees in the 'aesthetic economy'. They particularly interrogate the manner in which recruitment literature is used to reinforce expected gender roles, appropriate organizational embodiment and performativity, as a form of pre-entry organizational control. There was little evidence of gendering in the type of person-brand fit being practiced here, although one senior Oxygen respondent did suggest that some of his colleagues may have been selecting females for their looks. In the absence of further evidence little concrete can be said other than employers should certainly be careful not to employ branded selection practices that are discriminatory or reinforce harmful gender stereotypes. It could be speculatively argued, however, that Oxygen's recruitment literature communicated the appropriate cultural capital and therefore social background of applicants (whether intentionally or not), extending Hancock and Tyler's analysis into a different sphere. Clearly branded recruitment policies are not unproblematic and employers need to carefully consider the potentially harmful effects of these on particular social groups.

In conclusion, a greater emphasis on selecting employees who fit the brand may help hospitality employers and others in interactive services to reduce soft skills gaps.

Whilst this research was conducted on only two case studies and a relatively small sample of employees, the proposed relationship between selection practices, person-brand fit and soft skills gaps can be tested in other service settings. This chapter has demonstrated how emphasizing person-brand fit through informal yet selective and strategically integrated hiring practices, which allow applicants agency in selecting the organization, may be superior to standardized, competency-based selection procedures.

Although more research is needed on the direct link between HR practices, brand identification and employee outcomes, it may also be argued that this fit with the brand not only reduces skills gaps, but also increases employee satisfaction and commitment to the organization thus reducing turnover. Strategies that encourage person-brand fit, therefore, may also be beneficial for employees. Such policies allow potential employees to establish for themselves whether they fit the brand, facilitating the self-selection attraction and decision process, although the potential for negative stereotyping of certain groups must be borne in mind.

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Endnotes:

[1] 'Tam' is a Glaswegian version of the name 'Tom' or 'Thomas' associated with those from less affluent or socially excluded backgrounds.