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Reducing Social Skills Gaps through Person-Brand Fit and Human Resource Management
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Abstract

Fit between an organization's brand and its employees, sometimes referred to as employee brand identification, has been highlighted as an important element in delivering service quality. This paper examines the people management practices directed both at potential and current employees which enhance this 'person-brand fit' and proposes that effective management of this can help reduce the persistent problem of social skills gaps in service organizations. A study of managers and customer-facing employees in two hotel case studies – one reporting significant social skills gaps and the other reporting few gaps – showed that the hotel reporting fewer gaps had achieved greater employee identification with the brand. This hotel conducted recruitment and selection around person-brand fit, whilst the other hotel did not. The hotel reporting fewer social skills gaps also allowed greater employee agency in brand socialization, training and in the enactment of the brand on the job. The paper discusses the relevance of these findings for theory on how human resource management (HRM) practices may be linked to service brands in order to reduce social skills gaps.

Keywords: skills gaps; person-brand fit; HRM; recruitment; selection; socialization

Introduction

The social skills of employees include a range of learned qualities involving interpersonal interaction, self-management and service orientation (Petersen, Mumford, and Borman 2001). Such skills are gaining importance across employment contexts relative to technical ability and cognitive capacities (Dickerson and Green 2002; Grugulis, Warhurst, and Keep 2004). Gatta, Boushey, and Applebaum (2009) note how the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) classifies low-wage non-professional service occupations as especially reliant on ‘people skills’ rather than technical or abstract reasoning skills. This is most noticeable for customer-facing employees in interactive services, where service quality has been closely linked to social skills (Korczyński 2005; Nickson, Warhurst, and Dutton. 2005) and the ability to deal with high emotional demands (Burns 1997). In the hospitality sector, which is the focus of this paper, customer handling and self-presentation are now thought to be more important than technical skills and experience (Nickson et al. 2005).

Alongside this increased demand, however, employers have consistently reported social skills deficits. These deficits are of two types: social skills shortages in the labor market with respect to deficiencies in potential job applicants, and social skills gaps where current employees are considered not fully proficient (Baum 2002; Hurrell 2013). The hospitality sector is one of the worst affected by these deficits especially in customer facing roles and in terms of skills gaps (ibid). Within hospitality, these problems have been attributed to difficulties recruiting appropriate talent due to generally low work quality and pay levels (Bernhardt, Dresser, and Hatton 2006; Wilton 2006). Social skills deficits may, however, also be related to the industry’s *ad hoc* approach to staffing, training, retention and a lack of strategic integration of human resource management (HRM) with wider organizational practices (Hoque 2000).

This paper examines the role of HRM practices in enhancing person-brand fit to reduce social skills gaps in hospitality organizations. More specifically, we propose that employers reporting social skills gaps may be failing to design brand-centered HRM practices that facilitate alignment of employees' social skills with the brand. The notion of person-brand fit draws from the more generally used concept of person-organization fit. The paper begins by presenting an integration of marketing, HRM and organizational behavior literatures related to branding and people management. This review proposes a framework for examining how person-brand fit may be achieved, first, with potential job candidates' pre-organizational entry (through recruitment and selection) and second, with new and existing employees (through induction and training). We propose that where service organizations' HRM practices specifically consider person-brand fit employers will be less likely to report deficiencies in employees' social skills due to greater employee identification and alignment with the brand. This is then illustrated in a study of two contrasting hotel establishments - one reporting significant social skills gaps amongst existing employees and the other reporting few gaps. Based on this study, we argue that social skills deficits in service settings can be reduced by HRM practices that encourage brand identification and allow employee agency in the interpretation and enactment of brand attributes.

Achieving Person-Brand Fit

In his seminal discussion of the culture of the consumer in retail, du Gay (1996) noted the importance of an organization's personality for staying close to the customer and remaining competitive. He also alluded to the importance of brand identification when positing that the 'aesthetics and moral vision' of a company be transmitted through HRM practices in order to 'govern' employees' behavior in line with service requirements (p.138).

Other authors have more directly proposed a service strategy of attracting, developing and retaining appropriate talent to fit distinctive brands (e.g. de Chernatony and Segal-Horn 2003; Knox and Freeman 2006). A ‘best-fit’ perspective of HRM proposes the adoption of techniques that match employee qualities with the expectations of customers in the target market (Schneider and Bowen 1993). This fit becomes more important still for delivering service quality where there is greater intangibility in the service encounter (ibid).

Literature on internal brand management draws out similar connections between a service brand and people management. Burmann and Zeplin (2005), for instance, described brand-centered HRM as one of the three levers of a behavioral approach to managing internal brand identity (the other two being internal brand communication and brand-centered leadership). They argued for the selection and development of employees with high levels of brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviour, into organizational structures and cultures which support the creation of brand identity, through empowering employees to ‘take the necessary brand related decisions’ (p.294). In a later application, Burmann, Zeplin and Riley (2009) confirmed the power of their model in strengthening employee brand commitment and behaviors, ultimately contributing to the success of the organization’s brand with customers. However, their research did not elaborate on the processes by which HRM practices achieved employee brand identity and encouraged relevant behaviors, which is a gap this paper addresses.

In the present paper, our concern is whether brand-centered HRM could resolve hospitality organizations’ social skills gaps. This implies a closer analysis of the processes through which HRM practices align employee values and behavior with manifestations of a brand. Specifically, we focus in more detail below on how organizational entry, training and socialization processes can achieve alignment between employees and the cultural symbols,

values and assumptions about behavior that are thought to represent a strong brand identity (Holt 2004).

A Framework for Understanding Person-Brand Fit through Organizational Entry and Socialization

In a landmark contribution to the concept of person-organization fit, Schneider (1987) claimed that ‘the people make the place’; that is, organizations are nothing more than the collected attributes of the people who participate in them. Here, we extend this to understand how the people make the brand. Schneider proposed that fit occurs through a three-stage cycle of attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) whereby people are attracted to organizations and self-select into them (as well as being selected by organizations) before exiting if misfit occurs.

There has been a proliferation of studies on the conceptualization, antecedents and outcomes of fit (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson 2005). For the purposes of understanding our conception of person-brand fit, however, the most relevant research is that which examines the pre- and post-organizational entry experiences that influence value congruence (ibid). The parallel with arguments about the creation of a strong corporate culture is clear. For example, du Gay reports customer-focused retail strategies, which were implemented fastidiously throughout businesses’ HRM practices, ‘labeling from above’ the reality in which staff were to operate (1996, p.75). Such efforts reflect Martin’s (1992) integrationist perspective of culture, which highlights the importance of consistent, shared values (e.g. around a strong brand identity) that are aligned with desirable behaviors. These ideas relate well to the notion of brand identification, facilitating the appropriate set of behaviors (skills) for the service interaction. Recruitment, selection, induction and training all play vital roles in communicating

management goals and internalizing organizational values.

Attraction and Selection into the Organization

For job applicants, initial attraction to an organization occurs when they perceive congruence between their own values or personality and what the organization presents as its culture (Rynes and Cable 2003). Perceptions of fit or lack of fit lead applicants to self-select in or out of the relationship at the early stages of recruitment (Herriot 2002). Critically, for attracting applicants, symbolic attributes, such as espoused values (e.g. brand or service philosophy), may be equally, or even more, important than instrumental attributes such as pay or benefits (Lievens and Highhouse 2003). At the selection stage, processes designed to allow the evaluation of person-organization fit also enable the judgment of congruence between individual values and the organization's cultural value system (Schneider, Goldstein, and Smith 1995) and thus conceivably the brand.

Although these studies assume a rational, conscious decision-making process, whereby both potential employees and the organization evaluate information about the other, it is possible also to think of a more sub-conscious process of fit underlying identification with a brand. Allen (2002) applies the idea of self-evaluation to consumer choice in postsecondary education. His notion of Fits Like A Glove (FLAG) decision making suggested an intuitive or spontaneous process whereby decisions of fit with an organization are made from *in situ* experiences, shaped partly by individuals' socio-historical contexts. Allen's work mirrors Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital, whereby class replication practices lead individuals from middle and higher class social backgrounds to acquire an embodied and enacted cultural habitus. For employment selection, therefore, those with a particular habitus may find that certain employer brands 'fit like

a glove' and subsequently decide to seek employment with a particular firm. Similarly, employers may be aware of this fit themselves and hire people with habitus that best represents the brand, in order to ensure the enactment of social skills in line with organizational expectations.

Socialization into the Organization

For existing employees, brand identification is strengthened through further organizational communication of brand values during socialization (e.g., Burmann and Zeplin 2005, Edwards 2010). Returning to Schneider's integrative ASA framework, this explicitly considers the possibility that if individuals discover post-organizational entry that the organization's values do not fit their own, they may then exit. Brand values and symbols potentially form part of this post-hire evaluation of whether or not to remain with the organization.

Some socialization tactics have received more attention than others in the literature. Newcomer socialization, and especially early induction and training, is thought to reduce employees' role ambiguity, role conflict and intention to quit the organization while improving job satisfaction and organizational commitment (e.g. Cooper-Thomas and Anderson 2002; Feldman, 1989). Going further, advocates of proactive socialization argue against solely treating newcomers as passive recipients of information, transmitted through formalized training activities. They instead identify the importance of encouraging active search and acquisition of information for building social integration (Griffin, Colella, and Goparaju 2000; Morrison 1993).

Thus far, when discussing fit between applicants and organizations, we have concentrated on a unitary or integrationist perspective of culture (Martin 1992), which is shared throughout the organization, labeling organizational reality from above (du Gay 1996). In considering

person-brand fit as essentially a process of encouraging cultural fit, we do not lose sight, however, of alternative perspectives. These perspectives emphasize the differentiation (existence of sub-cultures) or fragmentation (ambiguity and flux) of organizational culture and that individuals may interpret cultural symbols in a manner inconsistent with organizational meanings (Martin 1992).

Going further still, those critical of strong socialization into organizational cultures suggest that it is simply a form of hegemonic control (Ray 1986). The pernicious nature of organizational socialization is neatly demonstrated by Pratt's (2000) description of quasi-religious organizational identification, amongst Amway catalogue network marketing distributors. Amway's organizational agents engaged in 'sensebreaking' activities, creating discontent for employees and potential recruits, before showing how the organization could satisfy the (generally material) needs identified in the sensebreaking process. Pratt voiced concern that 'organizations (may) take advantage of individuals by bending their will to that of the organization' (p.488).

For critics, therefore, allowing individuals an active role in interpreting their surroundings may be of little concern to organizations as this contradicts the purposes of hegemonic socialization. The concept of proactive socialization, however, highlights how individual agency facilitates employees' cultural integration. Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2002) argue that allowing new employees to be proactive in acquiring organizational information, rather than forcing them to conform to prescribed behaviors, enables them to make sense of their environment and build closer value-based identification with the organization. Such attempts, however, should allow true and meaningful employee agency. Du Gay (1996) provides the example of one retail establishment where employees were expected, in theory, to

decide autonomously how to implement head office's customer service strategy. The initiative, however, was viewed as manipulative and contrived by staff, who expressed no personal involvement, and 'the degree of explicit manipulation of social interaction taking place became almost too embarrassing for comfort' (p.170). Labelling from above remained in this organization and staff felt far from empowered. Although alternative arguments are possible, therefore, recognizing the proactive socialization perspective, we propose that employee agency during socialization will help to align employees' social skills with brand requirements.

Research Propositions

The aims of this study are to examine whether particular HRM practices can shape person-brand fit, and the extent to which any lack of fit may explain the social skills gaps that have plagued the hospitality industry. Specifically, our review of the literature suggests that recruitment, selection and socialization (especially induction and training) practices that are designed to enhance person-brand fit could minimize social skills gaps. The proposed mechanism is achieved through aligning employees' attributes and behavior with the organization's brand and symbolic attributes via increased brand identification. Such a process may be especially likely where employees are allowed agency in the socialization process. We begin with a general proposition linking employee brand identification with the degree to which organizations report social skills gaps. The subsequent propositions then examine, specifically, how HRM practices may contribute to employee brand identification:

1. Employee brand identification will be strong in organizations that report few social skills gaps amongst their workforce (i.e. where employees' social skills are aligned with

organizations' service requirements) and weak in organizations that report high social skills gaps.

2. The likelihood of employee brand identification will be increased by recruitment and selection practices that promote person-brand fit.
3. Socialization processes (illustrated by induction and training) that encourage employee behaviors matched to brand attributes and allow employee agency will lead to stronger employee brand identification.

We examined these propositions using a case study comparison of two hotels that had reported contrasting skills situations – low versus high social skills gaps. The purpose of this approach was to explore the effects of HRM practices and the extent to which person-brand fit accounted for these hotels' contrasting predicaments.

Methodology

Case Study Selection and Background

The study was part of a wider project investigating social skills deficits in Scotland, stimulated by the nationally representative Scottish Employer Skills Surveys (SESS). Two, anonymized, hotels were chosen from respondents to the 2004 SESS: 'Fontainebleau', which had reported social skills gaps and 'Oxygen', which had not. Broadly similar establishments, employing 100 or more and part of multi-site operations were selected, as these are more likely to have formalized HRM practices (Cully, Dix, O'Reilly, and Woodland 1999). Fontainebleau employed approximately 130 staff and Oxygen 220. The hotels were drawn from the same labor market to minimize potential variation in the pool of available labor. Both were situated in Glasgow, and were part of international hotel chains.

Staff were predominantly employed in Food and Beverage (F and B), Events, Housekeeping, Front Office (reception) and the Kitchen. The largest employee group in both hotels was F and B and Events, accounting for 40% and 53% of staff in Fontainebleau and Oxygen, respectively. Just under two-thirds of staff across both hotels were part-time.

Entry-level pay for front-line staff was low as is the norm in the UK hotel industry (Wilton 2006). Fontainebleau paid the national minimum wage and Oxygen approximately 10% above the national minimum wage. There were opportunities for annual performance-related pay rises in both hotels. In Oxygen, additionally, there were predefined pay scales for each job along which employees could progress, all employees were offered the chance for a company pension and managers received private healthcare. Both hotels offered a range of non-monetary rewards such as discounted stays; food and beverage in sister hotels (with Fontainebleau offering a higher discount rate); prizes and vouchers for 'employee of the month' and other performance recognition schemes; and gifts on employees' birthdays and at Christmas. Given broad similarities between the hotels' reward packages for front-line staff, it was not expected that the extrinsic benefits on offer would greatly affect recruitment, and neither hotel reported using the full range of details about benefits in recruitment advertising.

Data Collection

Qualitative data was used to explore each organization's skills demand, skills gaps, service brands, recruitment, selection, induction and training strategies. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with HR representatives/line managers and employees, and an employee focus group in Oxygen.

Management/HR interviews (four in each hotel) addressed: the skills and characteristics

sought for employment; whether skills gaps existed; the nature and effectiveness of HRM practices; and the service brand requirements. Employee interviews (a total of 11) and the focus group (involving eight employees) addressed: the skills and traits employees believed were sought by management; experiences of induction, training and recruitment and selection; service brand requirements; what was expected of employees in terms of customer service; and what employees did or did not like about working for their establishments. The employees involved were all customer-facing staff, who were most likely to be affected by efforts to match them with the hotel's brands.

The line managers interviewed were responsible for each major customer-facing department in the hotels: Food and Beverage (e.g. bar and restaurants outlets) and Events (including conference and banqueting) (FBM); Front Office (reception) (FOM); and the management team. In both hotels, HR representatives were interviewed to give an overview of the whole establishment. In Oxygen, the Deputy General Manager (DGM) spoke for the skills of the management team whilst a second HR representative did so in Fontainebleau. Fontainebleau's HR representatives are referred to as HR1 and HR2 respectively.

All managers and HR representatives worked full-time and were UK nationals. Fontainebleau's managers had between two months and over two years' service in the hotel although three of the four managerial respondents (the FBM, FOM and second HR representative) had worked in the establishment for less than 18 months. The relatively low average service was not especially problematic as they were asked about the present situation. The newest managerial respondents (HR2 and FBM) had also come from another Fontainebleau hotel within Glasgow. Oxygen's managers had greater experience in the hotel on average, with between 18 months and four years' experience.

The intention was to conduct front-line employee focus groups in both hotels through voluntary sign-up. In Fontainebleau, however, no employees volunteered (despite offering an incentive) and the HR representative was unable to allow employees to complete the focus group during working hours. An alternative arrangement was made whereby the researcher arranged times with the HR representative to visit the hotel during less busy periods and interviewed whoever was available and willing to be interviewed at the time. This approach yielded seven participants - one Receptionist, four Events, and two F and B (restaurant) employees. These included full- and part-time workers (although full-time workers constituted four of the seven participants), men and women, UK and non-UK nationals. The employees had worked for the hotel from six months to three years, although only two of the seven had worked for the hotel for two years or more.

In Oxygen, a focus group (FG) was conducted with eight employees from F and B and Events. Five of the focus group participants were male, three female, and participants had between one and a half and four years of service. Six of the focus group employees worked part-time, with two working full-time since finishing university; all were UK nationals. Four employee interviews were also carried out with one Front Office and three F and B and Events staff. Again, the HR representative arranged appropriate days and staff who were available and willing to be interviewed were selected. These employees represented full- and part-time employees (although part-time staff accounted for three out of the four interviewees), men and women, and UK and non-UK nationals. Reflecting the focus group, the Oxygen interviewees had, on average, worked for the hotel for a longer period of time than their Fontainebleau counterparts (two to three years' service).

The convenience yet purposive sampling approach was unavoidable as management released whichever employees were available for interview when the researcher was present. It is conceivable that management may have selected ‘preferred’ respondents although this was (in theory) equally likely to have occurred in both hotels and there was no evidence that this had happened. Full-time employees were also slightly over-represented in the Fontainebleau sample. Despite some unforeseeable variations in each hotel’s respondents, the same employee groups were represented in each hotel and contained a mix of genders, nationalities and full- and part-time employees, with strong consistencies found within employees’ testimonies. The participants were thus considered robust reflections of each hotel’s customer-facing workforce.

Analysis

The main themes used to structure questioning are summarized in Table 1. The data were subsequently analyzed thematically around the research propositions. The extent to which person-brand fit was present in both establishments and in what forms emerged from the detailed thematic analysis of HRM practices, the service requirements of each establishment and employee testimony regarding the establishment’s brands.

****Take in Table 1 here****

Findings

Evidence supporting each of the three propositions is presented in detail below. In summary, there were clear differences in the extent to which the two hotels reported social skills gaps and achieved person-brand fit through recruitment, selection and socialization. There were fewer reported social skills gaps and greater employee identification with the brand in Oxygen than in Fontainebleau (Proposition One), even though both hotels appeared to have equally strong (although qualitatively very different) brands. Oxygen focused more explicitly on person-brand fit during recruitment and selection processes (Proposition Two) and had an induction and training approach which allowed employees greater agency in the identification and interpretation of brand requirements (Proposition Three). This agency extended to the job itself with Oxygen allowing employees considerably more discretion in how they used their social skills in line with their brand.

Proposition One: Brand requirements, person-brand fit and social skills gaps

Proposition One posits that fewer social skills gaps would be evident in organizations where there was strong employee brand identification. Each hotel's service brand; the extent of employee awareness of, and identification with, the brand; and how brands were reflected in required employee skills and behaviors are examined below.

Oxygen: the 'Style' Hotel

Oxygen had a clear service philosophy; '*nae bother*', a colloquial Scottish term meaning 'it's not a problem'. This philosophy was described by both employees and management as seeking to give employees discretion in enacting the brand and dealing with guest issues to provide '*100*

percent guest satisfaction’ (Events employee). The brand was described as *‘informal’*, aiming for *‘genuine friendliness’* on the part of employees rather than relying on overly prescribed brand standards. Respondents also described the brand as *‘young’*, *‘fresh’* and *‘stylish’*. The hotel itself had minimalist, chrome and leather décor with modern art throughout, artifacts that further reflected the hotel’s style service brand. Customer advertising targeted the style market through pictures of the inside of the hotel alongside words such as *‘distinctive’*, *‘unmistakable’* and *‘unique’* before adding *‘but enough about our guests...’* and then stating what the hotel had to offer. The hotel building had also won style and architecture awards.

A further distinctive aspect of Oxygen’s service brand, consistent with the target customer market, was the requirement for employee style in terms of dress, appearance, speech and deportment, summarized by one managerial respondent (the DGM) as *‘polish’*. Oxygen’s FOM, for example, stated a problem with local non-student applicants who *‘speak very Glasgow’*, whilst the HR representative believed that as many of the hotel’s guests were middle class, employees from commensurate backgrounds found it easier to interact with them. Although managers were at pains to emphasize that employees from any class background would be hired if they showed the relevant interpersonal skills, the implication for the selection of those from middle class backgrounds remains:

I know I sound like somebody from Hitler Youth, but yes I do [think social background matters]... unless people are polished there is no hope for them. 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 revealing antipathy towards hiring those from disadvantaged backgrounds, referred to colloquially as ‘*neds*’ and also expressing the importance of being ‘*beautifully educated*’ (Respondent 2).

This evidence shows that both managerial and employee respondents emphasized the importance of fit with the service brand, although apparently partially based on social class. All respondents reported the importance of style and self-presentation. Whilst this requirement was not for being good looking *per se*, the focus group respondents stated that Oxygen employees needed to be ‘*students*’, ‘*funky*’, ‘*friendly*’ and ‘*individual*’ in terms of their style. In keeping with the ‘*nae bother*’ philosophy, employees were allowed discretion in interpreting appearance guidelines in line with the hotel’s brand. Although employees had a designer uniform they were allowed bodily and uniform adornments, ‘*crazy*’ hairstyles (FG respondent 6) and facial hair as long as these were viewed as ‘*stylish*’, and did not contravene health and safety legislation.

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. We don't tend to go too heavy on it ... 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 employee respondents reinforced the integrity of this fit between employees’ appearance and style 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 FG 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 FG respondent 8).

In discussing the centrality of fit between employees and the brand, Oxygen employees also reported identification with the hotel's style of service.

We all have to feel trendy, it's a trendy hotel, there's no point in the décor being trendy if it's a bunch of slobs that are working in there ... so you have to feel a certain sense of coolness to yourself. It's a five star hotel; let's have five star workers (Events employee, Oxygen).

I just enjoy working here; I just like the values that the hotel has, the whole kind of 'nae bother' thing, it's very good and I think it's one of the best things that they can promote (F and B employee 2, Oxygen).

Focus group employees also reported that they would use the hotel as customers, for example because the hotel was seen as '*modern and stylish*' (Oxygen FG respondent 3) and because it was a '*fashion and status thing*' (Oxygen FG respondent 5). Two focus group respondents also reported how they encouraged their friends and family to use the hotel, one with noticeable success.

Yeah, my mum's company use us now because she knows what goes on. Because of what I go home and say. And they've now bought a thousand room nights as they're moving in next door and booked their Christmas party and stuff in here. I would say that's a lot to do with me, what I go home and say, whether it's my mum or another guest who I say it to (Oxygen FG respondent 5).

Fontainebleau: Prescribed Tradition and Formality

Management and employees characterized the hotel's service brand as '*formal*', '*traditional*' and '*professional*', in keeping with its long established reputation, with recognizability of the brand and global reputation key brand differentiators. The hotel catered for a variety of customers from the leisure, business and events markets, but the emphasis was on leisure (e.g. short breaks) and events, especially weddings and large parties. The décor reflected traditional style with opulent furniture, fittings and classical art reproductions, with organizational artifacts again reflecting the hotel's brand. Employees reported that they were expected to be polite, clean, and tidy to appear professional.

Fontainebleau's service encounter was dictated by exacting brand standards that stipulated precise steps and stages for each service encounter. This was evident, for example, in front office where each check-in encounter involved a checklist of behaviors displayed prominently behind the desk. Although employees felt that they were not just reading out a script and could take time to chat with customers if circumstances allowed, there remained specific behaviors that had to be used for each service encounter. The receptionist, for example, remarked jokingly that she sometimes felt a bit like a '*robot*'. One F and B employee and all four Events employees also said that serving at functions was done in a strict regimented sequence in line with the brand standards.

Apart from one Events respondent mentioning that Fontainebleau probably would not employ a '*ned off the street*', no other respondents mentioned the importance of fit between employees' attributes and the hotel's brand. Employees did report that they enjoyed working in the hotel, primarily because of social relations with their colleagues and managers. One lone (F and B) employee also noted that he had moved to the company from an independent restaurant

because he was thinking *'long-term'* believing Fontainebleau had a reputation for good management *'career options'*. Respondents, however, did not report identification with brand values and the style of the establishment in contrast to Oxygen.

Indeed, despite the attempts to reflect the brand through formally prescribed service encounters, the FBM believed that the Fontainebleau brand was becoming rather staid with the hotel *'selling the same thing everyday and not being [more] market driven'*, before adding that the company as a whole accepted some *'pretty mediocre hotels that require a bit of life injected into them'*. From this respondent's point of view, the Fontainebleau brand identity was fading.

Unlike in Oxygen where employees operated within a broad dress code using their discretion to fit the style of the establishment, Fontainebleau's appearance policy was highly prescribed. Staff uniforms were standardized and purchased from an industry-clothing supplier. Two Events employees reported that the uniforms were made from a heavy fabric that restricted their movements and caused them to be uncomfortably hot. Strict guidelines 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 jewelry. Employees were not permitted to personalize their uniforms in any way.

Social Skills Gaps in the Hotels

Oxygen appeared to have secured greater identification amongst employees with their style brand than Fontainebleau had with their more traditional brand. For Proposition One to hold, we would also expect fewer employee social skills gaps to be reported by Oxygen's management. Indeed, the hotels were chosen from the SESS to reflect high (Fontainebleau) and low (Oxygen) social skills gaps settings; management corroborated these findings. In Oxygen, social skills gaps

in customer-facing staff were rare. Only the DGM reported any such gaps, stating that 20% of the 21 managers had skills gaps, some of which were in social skills.

In Fontainebleau, however, social skills gaps were widely reported across all customer-facing departments and by each interviewed manager, affecting approximately 25-30% of all customer facing staff/managers. Gaps were most widely reported in customer handling skills, followed by teamworking and oral communication. Table 2 summarizes the skills gaps in Fontainebleau for each employee group. Many of the reported gaps involved employees who had been in the organization for some time, so were unlikely to be purely attributable to new staff that had not undergone preliminary training.

****Take in Table 2 here****

Proposition Two: Person-Brand Fit in Recruitment and Selection

Recruitment

Proposition Two stated: *The likelihood of strong employee brand identification will be increased by recruitment and selection practices that promote person-brand fit.* The hotels used a similar range of recruitment methods for frontline positions - internal advertising throughout sister hotels; the (government) Job Centre; a general Scottish recruitment website; adverts in schools, colleges and universities; informal applicant drop-ins; referrals from current staff; and recruitment agencies. Adverts in newspapers and a trade publication were used occasionally. For more senior positions, specialized hospitality recruitment websites were also used, although many such positions were filled internally.

Oxygen's approach, in addition, aimed to attract front-line candidates who fit their service brand. For example, university careers services were reported as the most extensively used method by the HR representative and FBM as students were seen to epitomize the style of

service. Although Fontainebleau also used employee referrals – HR1, for example, believed this fostered a ‘happy’ environment and better teamwork – this practice was not explicitly linked to brand-fit in this establishment. The Oxygen focus group noted that the Events department was populated by ‘*friends of friends of friends! – [they] tend to be [the] same [as us] and the right kind of person*’ (FG respondent 5).

Oxygen’s local recruitment literature also emphasized the fit between employees and the hotel. One recruitment advert, for example, mirrored the customer advert described above. This recruitment advert contained a picture of the hotel’s interior and called on the ‘*distinctive*’, ‘*unmistakable*’ and ‘*unique*’ characteristics of potential recruits to mirror Oxygen’s brand. In contrast, Fontainebleau’s recruitment adverts were job focused, with no indication that employees should reflect the organization’s brand characteristics.

Selection

Fontainebleau’s HR1 described an indiscriminate approach to hiring: ‘*Some of the managers would recruit, you know, based on the fact that “OK that person’s willing to do the job” and not necessarily concerned with what skills they have*’. Other Fontainebleau managers also reported that they were simply looking for reliability and work ethic as much as anything else when selecting staff, with the F and B Manager also reporting that he tried to avoid ‘*troublemakers*’. Recent changes to rectify the problem highlighted by HR1 included a requirement for two interviews (with the prospective line manager and then HR) for all entry-level positions. For managerial positions, further interviews were required, and personality tests, assessment centers and occasionally presentations were used for more senior roles. All employees had reference checks and a minimum 12-week probationary period. Fontainebleau had recently invested in

training line managers on standardized competency-based interviews. One employee summed up their experience of such an interview:

All the questions were geared around if you were placed in a work situation - what could happen in a hotel, how you would react to it. Like a complaining customer or a dissatisfied guest (Events employee 1).

The extent to which managers followed the recommended approach in Fontainebleau varied. Both interviews were carried out for outlet managers (such as the bar and restaurant) but the FBM acknowledged that for front-line staff only the line manager interview was used. Although this *did* follow the competency-based format, his interest was more on candidates' willingness to do the job, reflecting the concerns of HR1. Notably, this manager had also reported skills gaps in over a quarter of his front-line employees (Table 2). F and B employees confirmed they had received only one interview (the exception was a non-UK national for whom employment documents had to be confirmed). Only the receptionist reported more than one person present at her interview. Three employees also described unstructured interviews (two F and B employees and one Events staff), with one member of F and B staff declaring: *'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].'* The second F and B employee 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 Events 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...my sister's friend ...so she just said, "Yes. He's a good worker" and stuff. ... and he [the Events manager] was like "basically you've got the job then" (Fontainebleau Events employee 4).

Although managers in Fontainebleau did not explicitly use fit with the brand as a selection requirement and employees showed little brand identification, managers still provided realistic job previews. All Fontainebleau employees reported that managers had been very clear regarding what their jobs would involve, as reflected by two of the Events employees.

There was never any, you know, trying to make it [the job] easier than what it was.

Definitely you knew what you were in for I think (Fontainebleau Events employee 2).

They just tell you what's expected of you and that's exactly what it is'

(Fontainebleau Events employee 1).

Oxygen's policy was also that candidates received at least two interviews, with HR and the prospective line manager. As with Fontainebleau, however, employees reported receiving only one interview. References were checked for every new recruit and new employees were subject to a three to six month probationary period depending on their role. Additional methods facilitating person-brand fit were also evident. Anyone applying for Front Office positions had to be seen by the Hotel's GM or DGM to ensure that they would be suitable representatives for the Oxygen brand. For management and some supervisory positions (depending on the line manager's discretion) psychometric tests or presentations were conducted, showing a more selective approach. A final stage for all interviewees was a tour of the establishment during which they could ask questions and discuss Oxygen with the interviewer.

Interviews in Oxygen were deliberately informal, mirroring the 'nae bother' service brand. 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, '*genuine*' personality and interpersonal skills. According to the HR representative,

the interview was used to learn about the individual and gauge relevant work or social experiences. All managers confirmed this.

Interviews were viewed as a two-way process, intended to establish what candidates expected from the job and whether this *'married up with reality'* (FOM). The FOM found the tour of the establishment particularly effective for assessing the reality of candidates' expectations and whether they believed they would be suitable to work there. Correspondingly, employees confirmed the usefulness of realistic previews of the job. For example:

[The manager] did show me about the hotel ... and she said I would probably be in Events and she showed me the hall and things, which was really scary, because we hold 500 in the hall...it was a massive hall. But it was fine' (Oxygen F and B, employee 2).

Employees agreed that their interviews had been *'much less formal'* than they had expected. One interview lasted *'about 5 minutes'* (F and B employee 1) although this employee had already had two trial shifts, which had been the main hiring method. The HR respondent described how Oxygen preferred to conduct interviews in the hotel restaurant, bar or foyer. An Events employee confirmed that his manager just *'popped down'* from his office for a *'relaxed'* interview in one of the hotel bars, and all employees believed that the selection process mirrored the hotel's informal service brand:

We do it [the interview] (pause) the way the hotel works, it's quite an informal hotel in the fact that I speak to guests the way I would speak to (pause) well not the way I would speak to my friends, but I chat away to them just as if they're normal people...(Oxygen F and B employee 2).

The following FO employee typified Oxygen's approach to establishing a positive image during early informal encounters with employees.

My first contact with the hotel was a very positive impression. Actually, I had another job as well... and I never went back to it; my first impression of Oxygen was really, really positive, and it was through the interview.

Proposition Three: Person-Brand Fit in Induction and Training

Proposition Three stated: *Socialization processes (illustrated by induction and training) that encourage employee behaviors matched to brand attributes and allow employee agency will lead to stronger employee brand identification.* Given the differences in employee brand identification noted in Proposition One, any differences in the hotels' socialization process also need to be established. Training in Fontainebleau began with a three-day group induction for all new employees. Induction covered information about the company, the brand, job duties, equal opportunities and elements of health and safety. Much of this initial and subsequent training involved Fontainebleau's prescriptive brand standards. On completion, each employee was given a folder containing modules on the skills needed for their jobs, which were completed and authorized by a manager on-job, leading to a recognized UK vocational qualification. Managers and employees reported that training was offered as and when required to all occupational groups either on-the-job (often through shadowing) or refresher courses (especially for customer service and brand standards).

Oxygen's HR representative described a three-day induction process covering an introduction to the company, '*statutory stuff*' such as health and safety, customer service, and product knowledge (which included brand training). Employees were required to attend the first of these days before starting in the hotel. Oxygen's 'nae bother' brand philosophy was strongly emphasized, for example through reinforcing that employees should (as also stated by the Events

employee) be *'five star quality'* (F and B employee 1) to fit the hotel. Employees were also given a free dinner, bed and breakfast stay in the hotel, which was to be taken in their probationary period, during which they were treated like any other customer. Managers stated that this stay in the hotel was specifically included to familiarize new employees with the customer experience. Indeed, as reported above, employees appeared to identify with the brand as customers as well as workers.

Discussion of training activity focused on the *'nae bother'* brand philosophy. According to managers, this was not simply about telling employees what to say and how to say it but about allowing employees to conduct service encounters, as they felt best, whilst operating within broad guidelines. For example, employees were informed of the maximum offer they could make in the face of a complaint (free food and beverages and nights in the hotel) but were encouraged, according to the HR representative, to use their initiative to satisfy customers, in the knowledge that managers were *'not bothered'* if someone provided an apparently disproportionate recourse to a complaint. This was confirmed by the first F and B employee:

Our management won't come over and say that you shouldn't have given them [that], like you were wrong to say that; they stick by you...So it's really good the fact that you've got the ability to do that [act autonomously] here.

Employee comments on *'nae bother'* training were positive. The Events employee described it as varied and enjoyable, commenting that training reflected the company's ethos; *'it's nice to have a company who thinks so highly of 100 percent guest satisfaction'*. The enactment of customer service was not tightly prescribed, however, with the second F and B employee revealing that employees were empowered and never expected to do anything beyond their comfort zone.

We get training on our whole *'nae bother'* thing. They [managers] expect you to do what

feels comfortable I think. If someone's a very quiet person, doesn't feel comfortable with approaching a guest about a problem or something, then that's fine. You're not pushed into trying to find a solution ... but we do have the ability to make it (pause) or the ability or chance to make things better for people in a customer service way.

Discussion

This paper conceptualizes person-brand fit as a special case of person-organization fit, going beyond previous research on employee brand management (e.g., Burmann and Zeplin 2005; Burmann, et al. 2009). We use Schneider's (1987) Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA) framework to establish whether and how person-brand fit is influenced at the recruitment (attraction), selection, induction and training stages of organizational socialization. Following the ASA framework, we argue that when organizations use recruitment, selection and socialization methods that encourage employees to identify with the symbolic attributes of an organization (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003; Holt 2004), employee behavior is more likely to reflect the brand. Building on the critical role of social skills in customer service contexts, we propose that this matching of employees' behavior with the organization's symbolic attributes is associated with improved match between employees' social skills and the organization's service requirements; in other words, fewer reported social skills gaps by the organization.

The analysis of two hotel case studies supports a relationship between employee brand identification and fewer social skills gaps, through HRM practices that promote person-brand fit. Fontainebleau reported more social skills gaps than Oxygen despite operating in a similar industry context and labor market. In addition, although both hotels had strong service brands, there was greater evidence of employee brand identification in Oxygen. Employees here believed that they represented the brand, and fit the hotel both aesthetically and in terms of the hotel's

values. They acted as brand ambassadors in discussions with friends and family or reported aspirational elements in using the hotel as a consumer (e.g. linking the hotel with fashion and status). Oxygen's brand resonated with or complemented employees' own identities. Notably, there was no indication that this resembled more pernicious organizational identification practices, such as the sensebreaking strategies of Amway described by Pratt (2000). Whilst Fontainebleau employees were aware of the hotel's brand requirements, there was no explicit linkage made between themselves and the hotel's brand aesthetics or values. Thus, the findings support Proposition One that, employee brand identification will be strong in organizations that report few social skills gaps and weak in organizations that report high social skills gaps.

Propositions Two and Three then explored how HR practices achieved person-brand fit. At the attraction stage, Oxygen communicated their brand's symbolic attributes in their recruitment advertising and the importance of fit between applicants and their 'style' brand. There was no evidence of this in Fontainebleau where recruitment information focused on the job rather than brand. Oxygen thus communicated its symbolic attributes and organizational personality at an early stage (Lievens and Highhouse 2003; Slaughter and Greguras 2009), conceivably to allow applicants the opportunity to make a self-assessment of person brand fit. Applicants may also have been guided by Allen's (2002) Fits like A Glove (FLAG) decision making whereby decisions of fit are made intuitively or spontaneously, in this case following exposure to particular recruitment events.

Managers in Oxygen placed greater emphasis on person-brand fit in their approach to selection. An example of this was the explicit involvement of the GM or DGM in selection of Front Office staff to assess brand suitability. Oxygen managers also appeared to have a greater strategic awareness of the types of social skills that fit the Oxygen brand, and such factors

reportedly informed their selection decisions. There was evidence from employees that the informal style of selection interviews reflected the hotel's informal and empowered 'nae bother' philosophy, thus communicating the organization's personality to applicants pre-hire (Slaughter and Greguras 2009). This personality may be seen as part of the brand's values and may again reflect Allen's notion of FLAG decision-making where decisions about fit are made holistically from *in situ* experiences, in this case the selection process. Such FLAG decisions may have been further enhanced by the informal establishment tours. Managers emphasized the tours as important for helping applicants to establish whether they wanted to work for the establishment, and in turn, employees acknowledged that the tour allowed a realistic preview of their work.

In Fontainebleau, the official selection process was more formal and, on paper, consistent with 'best practice' recommendations for hotels, for example, using structured competency-based approaches and multiple interviews (Lockyer and Scholarios 2004). This approach was not explicitly aligned with the brand, however. Furthermore, departures from HR's recommended selection process were evident; for example, managers based judgments on a single interview, passively accepted the judgments of employee referrers, or judged applicants only on their willingness to do the job. It could be argued that the FBM's selection criterion of trying to avoid 'troublemakers' was consistent with the more prescribed approach to implementing brand standards in Fontainebleau (e.g. selecting those who would follow checklists and scripts); however, this does not reflect selection according to brand attributes themselves. Fontainebleau employees also gave no indication of selection practices matching brand values.

Given that Oxygen employees reported stronger identification with the brand, these findings support Proposition Two: *The likelihood of employee brand identification will be increased by recruitment and selection practices that promote person-brand fit.* It is not clear

whether employees made self-assessments of brand-fit pre-hire, although we have discussed this possibility above. Whatever the mechanism, however, the contrasts in recruitment and selection practices, employee brand identification and social skills gaps between Fontainebleau and Oxygen are clear.

It should be acknowledged that recruitment and selection processes such as Oxygen's are potentially problematic because of the risk of social exclusion and negative stereotyping. In Oxygen, this was most apparent in terms of the selection of those from certain class or educational backgrounds who were '*polished*' and '*beautifully educated*'. As discussed above, Oxygen employees potentially displayed FLAG decision-making and such decisions (in this case whether to work for Oxygen) are also informed by individuals' wider socio-historical contexts, such as class background (Allen 2002). Oxygen's branding requirements for style may have attracted those from more affluent backgrounds with commensurate cultural capital and embodied habitus internalized through middle class culture (Bourdieu 1984). FLAG decision-making may also have caused managers to select those with such habitus. The potential thus exists for managers to make halo or horns decisions based purely on class background ignoring applicants' true social skills in the process. Informal branded recruitment and selection processes could potentially also reinforce negative gender or even racial stereotypes. Such stereotypes are already apparent when selecting people for certain kinds of service work as Gatta et al. (2009) show in the U.S. context (see also Nickson and Warhurst 2007 for class; Hancock and Tyler 2007 for gender; and Moss and Tilly 1996 for race).

Proposition Three focused on induction and training which many writers in this area have regarded as critical stages of early socialization into organizational values (e.g. Feldman 1989). Consistent with the skills required for customer facing work, interpersonal skills were a key

component of training and induction in both establishments. Both hotels also spent a considerable amount of training time on brand standards, but there were clear differences in how this was conducted. Oxygen allowed employees greater agency in the interpretation of brand standards and how they used their skills to achieve them, which appeared to contribute to their greater brand identification. Training in Fontainebleau was focused on prescribed operating procedures that were enforced in a standardized manner. Similarly, although induction was extensive in both, Oxygen displayed a broader socialization approach. Employees were provided with the information they required to be an organizational member, whilst also allowing them a role in experiencing the brand for themselves (for example, through the free stay in the hotel). This contrasts with Fontainebleau where employees were simply told about brand standards and how to enact these.

The study, thus, provides support for Proposition Three: *Socialization processes (illustrated by induction and training) that encourage employee behaviors matched to brand attributes and allow employee agency will lead to stronger employee brand identification.* The data highlighted the role of employee agency. While both hotels had strong brands that were communicated to employees, only Oxygen's socialization and induction practices appeared to allow employee discretion and de-emphasized labeling from above (du Gay 1996). There was evidence that this influenced the greater brand identification found amongst this hotel's employees. This is consistent with newcomer socialization theory which shows that employees who have had a more proactive role in interpreting their surroundings are more likely to identify with their organization and exhibit greater organizational commitment (Cooper-Thomas and Anderson 2002; Morrison, 1993). This, in turn, leads to reduced voluntary turnover (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, and Topolnytsky 2002), further reducing the chance of skills deficits. It

was, thus, not so much the strength of brand socialization that appeared to increase person-brand fit, but rather the manner of socialization.

As an outcome of employee agency, Oxygen employees described true empowerment rather than feelings of cynicism and manipulation. This is contrary to du Gay's (1996) example of the failed attempt in one organization at trying to convince employees they had autonomy in interpreting how organizational requirements were to be achieved. Research in service contexts has also shown that empowerment can aid employees' individual learning by reducing role ambiguity and increasing employee satisfaction (Chebat and Kollias 2000), whilst also facilitating customized service through greater employee adaptability (du Gay 1996; Gwinner, Bitner, Brown, and Kumar 2005). An essential point is that Oxygen's brand by its very nature, promoted informal enactment of social skills by employees; i.e. the brand itself required greater employee agency and empowerment. Some brand requirements, therefore, could more easily allow practices consistent with Proposition Three than others, suggesting that further research is required on this matter. The situation in Oxygen, nevertheless, still provides a valuable contrast to Fontainebleau.

The findings regarding employee agency in interpreting brand requirements also go beyond Proposition Three's focus on induction and training to the enactment of social skills on the job itself. Arguably, we can conceive of Oxygen as a 'higher' skill environment than Fontainebleau, allowing their employees greater discretion in using their own social and presentational skills (Hurrell, Scholarios, and Thompson 2013). Fontainebleau's more prescriptive approach effectively removed skill. As stated previously, Oxygen's rhetoric of empowerment and discretion appeared to reflect reality and was also consistent with the requirements of Oxygen's more informal service brand. That the environment which offered

higher discretion reported fewer social skills gaps is noteworthy, as the removal of discretion (and therefore skill) from service work is usually aimed at *increasing* conformity with service requirements in line with a particular target market (Schneider 1994).

It thus appears that what the brand emphasis is and how this is socialized, trained and enacted is important rather than simply the strength of the brand. Of course, the greater brand identification and superior enactment of social skills under conditions of discretion may have simply stemmed from Oxygen managers' greater strategic emphasis on person-brand fit during recruitment and selection. Nevertheless, as these elements cannot be disentangled in Oxygen, the findings on socialization and on-job discretion remain. Oxygen were consistent throughout the whole resourcing process (from recruitment to enactment on job) in terms of the kind of social skills they required, with HRM practices reflecting the brand and enabling brand-consistent behaviors. It could also be argued that Fontainebleau showed consistency post-hire in using a more prescriptive, lower discretion approach to achieve a more formal enactment of social skills, but this did not appear to successfully eradicate skills gaps nor promote employee identification with the brand.

Despite the positive findings regarding employee agency during socialization, we acknowledged in our earlier presentation of the literature that allowing agency in the interpretation of the brand could potentially lead to greater managerially perceived skills deficits if this created fragmented or differentiated cultures (Martin 1992). In the current study, Fontainebleau clearly attempted to form an integrated culture through tightly prescribed and enacted brand standards; but this neither created person-brand fit nor reduced social skills gaps. Oxygen built their culture in a different way, de-emphasizing labeling from above but still creating a strong and consistent brand. It may be appropriate to describe Oxygen as a weak

integrated culture where strong attachment to the brand is achieved through employee agency in interpreting and enacting brand requirements.

Managerial Implications

The paper has shown how seemingly informal yet strategically integrated staffing practices may prove beneficial in securing person-brand fit. We do not advocate the introduction of informality in the sense of what is already acknowledged to be largely *ad hoc* HRM practice in hotels (Hoque 2000; Wilton 2006). Nor do we advocate practices based on person-brand fit that increase the risk of social exclusion or negative stereotyping, whether consciously or unconsciously. The findings recommend, however, that managers explicitly design recruitment and selection practices around person-brand fit. The first stage of such a design involves using recruitment advertising that explicitly displays brand attributes and encourages employees to reflect on their fit with these. The second stage involves designing selection methods to convey brand values in order to allow employees to make a self- assessment of their fit with the brand. Contrary to ‘best practice’ prescriptions, informal recruitment and selection practices can still be strategically aligned with service business environments (Lockyer and Scholarios 2004), as demonstrated in Oxygen. In more formal service environments, it may be the case that selection methods reflecting formal brand values are more beneficial than Oxygen’s more informal approach. Unlike Fontainebleau, however, where selection processes were inconsistent, these methods should be consistently applied with managers also focusing on person-brand fit during the process.

The second implication for managerial practice concerns employee agency. The results suggest that training and socialization that allow employees an active role in interpreting their

surroundings may be superior in reducing social skills gaps to more prescriptive approaches which are highly directive and label from above. Allowing employees agency does not necessarily mean that organizational culture becomes fragmented as suggested by the Oxygen case. Furthermore if employee agency is extended to include giving employees discretion on the job itself, then this can allow true social skills use in enacting brand standards.

Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This research draws from two hotel case studies. The relationships discovered here require further testing across differing interactive service settings within and beyond the hotel sector to better understand their applicability in different contexts. The data was also limited by the absence of a focus group in Fontainebleau as was originally intended, which precluded a direct comparison with Oxygen using matched data sources. Nevertheless, the hotels' contrasting approaches to person-brand fit and the extent of employee brand identification in each was evident from multiple sources. We argue that the findings raise important issues that are relevant to other service settings relying on social skills and suffering from gaps in these skills.

Of further interest is the role of applicants in making self-assessments of person-brand fit during the attraction and selection stages, for example, whether there are any moments of truth at which applicants begin to identify with the brand pre-organizational entry. What we have identified is a case (Oxygen) in which there was a clearer focus by managers on person-brand fit during the recruitment and selection process, which also identified fewer social skills gaps and exhibited stronger employee identification with the brand. Within this case employees also identified greater congruence between the informal selection processes and the organization's brand personality. It is not clear, however, whether employees made self-assessments of brand-

fit during the attraction and selection stages. Methods which directly ascertain employee brand identification and any brand ‘epiphanies’ pre-organizational entry can help to elucidate these processes and address this limitation of our study. Reflective applicant diaries and/or observation (either participant or non-participant) which specifically focus on applicant reactions to branded practices during the recruitment (attraction) and selection stages may help to clarify these pre-hire processes.

Further research is needed across differentially branded service settings to establish whether certain kinds of brands are more likely to achieve employee identification and, if so, how, why and in whom. The more informal brand appeared successful in reducing social skills gaps, through allowing employees greater agency in socialization and discretion on the job itself. Further research may, if conducted in the correct contexts, disentangle whether this agency and discretion: reduces social skills gaps directly; increases employee identification with the brand (reducing social skills gaps indirectly); or is simply enabled through strategic consideration of person-brand fit during recruitment and selection. Given the apparent consistency between the informal manifestation of social skills required by Oxygen, and the allowance of employee agency and discretion, the question also remains as to whether Oxygen’s more informal HR practices could be implemented in a more formal service setting such as Fontainebleau.

In conclusion, this study has shown the potential of HRM practices that facilitate person-brand fit in the reduction of social skills gaps. The picture painted by this paper is a complex one. The organization that had an explicit focus on person-brand fit during recruitment and selection appeared to have achieved stronger employee identification with the brand and also reported fewer social skills gaps. Post-hire, it is not the mere existence or frequency of brand training and socialization which appears to affect social skills gaps, so much as the manner in which these are

carried out. Allowing greater employee agency in brand socialization and training processes seems to be a key factor in increasing person-brand fit, reinforced further by allowing employees discretion in interpreting and enacting brand values on the job itself. If employers can leverage identification with their brand through strategically integrated pre- and post- hire practices, then frontline service employees who really ‘make the service brand’ may be selected and developed, and social skills gaps significantly reduced.

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Table 1: Interview themes

Management/HR	Employees
Skills and characteristics sought in potential employees.	Skills and characteristics desired by management.
Skills gaps (number of current employees in departments (whole establishment for HR respondents) fully competent).	Managerial expectations of customer service.
HR practices and processes (recruitment, selection, induction and training).	Experiences of recruitment, selection, induction and training.
Service brand and brand requirements.	Service brand and brand requirements. Likes/dislikes about working in hotel.