



“WE ARE WORKING WITH HUMAN CAPITAL AND THAT DESERVES THE BEST OF OUR ATTENTION”

Prof. Filip De Fruyt

Filip De Fruyt is a professor at the University of Ghent (Belgium) in the Department of Differential Psychology and Personality Assessment. He is the University Chair of the Ayrton Senna Institute at Ghent University as well, where he researches the assessment and development of skills that young people need for life and employment.

De Fruyt is the President of the European Association of Personality Psychology (EAPP) and is currently a member of the editorial boards of several leading journals. In 2016, he was named a member of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), as recognition to the outstanding contributions he has made to this area of psychology. The aim of his current research line is to develop the socio-emotional characteristics of young people and adults as predictors of personal and professional success, and above all, of their employability. In addition, he has researched the emergence and development of leadership.

Dr. De Fruyt has written and published over 200 research papers and articles —both individually and col-

laboratively— in leading academic journals. His work has been repeatedly cited by a number of authors, which is evidenced by more than 13,000 citations of his papers in Google Scholar.

De Fruyt has designed, or has participated in the development of a number of personnel selection, assessment and development tools, mostly for psychological evaluation.

Over the last ten years, he has held 300 workshops and conferences on Applied Personality Psychology all over the world, —mostly aimed at personnel selection, assessment and development—, and so we had him in Vitoria-Gasteiz, April 10 and 11, 2019, on the Conference “Selection processes in Public Administration: experiences of the European Union, new approaches for new times”. There he gave a presentation on *Evidence-based recruitment and selection*, and we discussed this topic in the following interview.

Entrevista:

Miel A. Elustondo — Zaldi ero

What has been the traditional way to hire —you use the term “recruit” in English— employees in companies?

Recruitment and selection traditionally served to fill specific positions or vacancies. These were well-defined in terms of required competencies or skills. Given the quickly evolving job market across and within organizations, this is dramatically changing: Today it is about attracting and selecting people who are employable in the long run and can adapt to changes within the organization, public administration or society. Instead of a selection process with a particular vacancy in mind, we need to think in terms of attracting applicants who already have and further develop what we are calling transferrable skills.

Is there a single way of hiring people, both in public administration and in society at large? Should we speak of contacting or contracting?

If the latter, that is an administrative matter and less interesting. If the first (contacting), then I cannot un-

derscore enough that attracting a talented applicant pool is a key challenge for each organization. Employer branding has become increasingly important to attract the most talented people. Even the best selection procedure becomes useless, when one fails to attract the necessary talent. Organizations will hence have to think about how they will face this challenge, in other words: how does our organization or public administration want to be perceived by potential candidates. Today it is the candidate who selects first.

“Attracting a talented applicant pool is a key challenge for organizations”



They say that time changes everything. Regarding recruitment and selection processes, how have they changed in our society? Why have these changes been necessary or convenient?

Like I explained in my talk in Vitoria-Gasteiz, several changes did happen and continue to happen. First, there is a shift from attention for the 'diploma' towards attention for 'acquired skills'. The labor market today really wants to see skill potential in applicants: a diploma is a first step (entrance ticket) in the process, but skills will be assessed during the selection procedure. This continues during the career, where promotion is based more and more on performance and development instead of tenure or passing an exam.

A second change is that selection is moving from external towards internal recruitment and selection. Organizations need to be better aware of the potential of their workforce, so they can recruit and select internally, rather than having to attract all the time new people, who need to get accommodated to the culture of the organization. What the organization is looking for is often already within the organization.

A third revolution is the growing professionalization of selection, coming from a sort of amateurism ("I feel that this is a good candidate, ...") to evidence-based assessment. There is still a way to go here, but we are moving in the good direction.

Fourth, there is a shift from selection of a single individual to selection of an individual to work in a team, or even selecting an entire team. Work nowadays gets more and more team-based, and a team usually needs some communality, but also diversity to work as a group. The selection process needs to consider this new reality.

Fifth and finally, Human Resources (HR) as a field moved from a sort of 'administrative HR', taking care of people's contract and salary administration, to a strategically-embedded HR that forms an essential part of the organization's strategy. This implies that the HR director became part of the management team. This change indirectly impacted the selection process, where human capital and resources are now seen as a key value/resource of the organization.

What are the main challenges for recruitment and selection of professionals?

First, attract a sufficiently diverse talent pool (employer branding). Second, select evidence-based; there is no alternative for this step. Third, develop everyone once they are in the organization. Development should NOT be about rolling out one or another

high potential program, but should really involve a shift in the organization towards installing a learning culture, where everyone is activated to develop at least a few skills ("No employee left behind"). This will keep the workforce inside the organization flexible and employable.

"A team usually needs some communality, but also diversity to work as a group"

When selecting staff, do you have to take into account their work areas? That is, should all personnel be selected in the same or specific way? There will hardly be a unique, universal and invariable personnel selection method, right?

We could posit more questions: should selection processes be similar in all areas? Or, is it the same to select a police officer, a doctor or a primary school teacher? There are a number of relevant questions! How should I put it ... As always, there are common methods to select people across different work areas, but there are also specifics. Most transferrable skills can be assessed using the traditional methods used in selection, but for some functions, specific methods may be required. For the selection of prison guards or police recruits, for example, you want to select out people with a risk to demonstrate dysfunctional personality tendencies, so you will need a specific screening tool for that (e.g. by adopting TD-12 -Inventory of Dysfunctional Trends-). For the selection of bus drivers, on the other hand, you want to check their neurocognitive functioning and attention span, requiring specific neuropsychological assessments.

There will be a difference, however, in terms of the kind of constructs that you will assess. Assertiveness, politeness, integrity and emotional control will be important for the selection of security staff, for example, whereas for the selection of a tax controller, characteristics such as integrity, order, and responsibility will be at stake. These different constructs, however, can be assessed using the same methods.

"Most transferrable skills can be assessed using the traditional methods used in selection"

How can companies, in general, and public administrations, in particular, attract the best talents?

You really need to do an employer branding survey to examine how your organization (firm or public administration) is perceived by the people you want to attract. Do NOT assume that you know this perception, because you can misjudge this completely. If potential applicants do not perceive you as a potential interesting employer, you need to take action so you become attractive for them. This will require an in-depth, but also honest, analysis of your key strengths and what you can offer to applicants.

On the one hand, smart people with more talent, on the other hand, those less talented. The first point of article 23 of the Declaration of Human Rights establishes that everyone has the right to work, to choose their work, to have fair and adequate working conditions, to receive assistance to deal with unemployment...

Good point. I think that both private and public companies/administrations need to take responsibility to employ a diverse workforce, and that will imply and include people who are dealing with some constraints. As a society and as organizations we need to take an active responsibility in this, and everyone her/his particular strengths will have to be used to contribute to a common goal. Again, I would reinforce the "No employee left behind" theme, because local economies and societies will ultimately benefit if everyone contributes, has a professional identity, feels connected, and earns an income.

According to most common state-of-the art selection procedures, what skills and abilities should a professional have, regardless of the type of organization?

We recently published a paper in Psychological Assessment¹ where we proposed a model with five broad skill domains that students at school or appli-

cants on the labour market should work on. The key idea is that people try to develop skills across these five skill sets.

This integrative model encompasses: 'Engaging with others', representing skills that describe how we connect with and approach others, 'Amity/Collaboration', describing more quality-related interpersonal skills, such as trust, respect and empathy, 'Emotion regulation', capturing how we regulate our impulses and affective reactions, 'Self-management', representing skills that help us getting things done and achieve standards, and finally 'Open-mindedness', including those skills that help us to adapt to new conditions, including creativity, open-mindedness and fantasy.

Practicing skills across these five domains will help us facing and dealing with the challenges of today's society and work.

As they say, talent develops over time and with the proper performance of a particular job. How does that happen, within an organization? How do you develop the greater or lesser talent of a professional already selected and hired? According to your research, what is more necessary, selecting workers or subsequently develop their skills?

Talent does not develop in a vacuum, so you need to create a learning environment in your organization. Learning should be started when people come into the organization. Development is actually the new selection. It is also important that supervisors check-in regularly with their collaborators, because people change and mature in their professional and personal lives (e.g. getting babies, a partner, divorced,...) – all these events can impact their functioning and ambition level. There is nothing wrong with that, but too often, supervisors treat collaborators still according to the picture they have from them when they hired people.

Currently, many organizations organize a form of performance evaluation, but evidence for its effectiveness is mixed at best. I would suggest replacing the yearly 'performance evaluation' by an evaluation of 'learning performance', where the focus is on increasing the employability of the individual employee. This will benefit both the individual and the organization in the long run (and also performance, of course). The skill taxonomy I discussed previously can be very helpful here to align learning and development efforts and investments.

Finally, and probably most important: Skill development is a process, taking years. It is not the case that people will become more emotionally intelligent after having attended an expensive seminar in a luxury hotel for 6 hours. Change and development take effort, time and perseverance.

“I would suggest replacing the yearly ‘performance evaluation’ by an evaluation of ‘learning performance’”

Note

- 1 https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Loes_Abrahams/publication/330101563_Social-Emotional_Skill_Assessment_in_Children_and_Adolescents_Advances_and_Challenges_in_Personality_Clinical_and_Educational_Contexts/links/5c9c9ce545851506d7301eec/Social-Emotional-Skill-Assessment-in-Children-and-Adolescents-Advances-and-Challenges-in-Personality-Clinical-and-Educational-Contexts.pdf

Will the selection processes of the future be the same as those that exist today?

Cool question. Well, in all honesty, I cannot look into the future, but selection will be, by definition, always affected by changes happening in organizations and societies across time. So we can expect considerable impact of ICT in recruitment and assessment, such as the introduction of virtual reality, different forms of adaptive testing, or more advanced systems for the registration of acquired competencies. It will take much time, however, before all of this new technology, which may look fancy and catchy at first sight, has proven its utility, reliability and validity. Much work needs to be done here, and we need to be very careful that we do not overclaim. All in all, we are working with human capital, and that deserves the best of our attention.

