

Fit and Skill in Employee Selection: Insights from a Study of Headhunters

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We draw upon evidence from a qualitative study of headhunters to provide insights into the character and importance of candidate "fit" and skill for the selection of a broad range of white-collar employees. Headhunters suggest that the "fit" of a job candidate is assessed at two levels, one corresponding with a general compatibility with organization-level norms, culture, and strategy, the other corresponding more closely with traits and characteristics of the person or persons with whom the job candidate actually interviews. Skill—a factor which is largely neglected by those who tout the importance of fit—also plays an important and independent role in employee selection. Skills that influence the selection of employees from a pool of candidates tend to be highly specific if not idiosyncratic, and take the form of what headhunters call "hot buttons." We conclude by discussing the conceptualization, causes, and implications of fit; we also consider how the importance of fit and hot buttons challenges the explanatory logic of standard accounts of labor-market success.

KEY WORDS: employee selection; fit; headhunters; skill; workplace diversity.

Classical scholars as diverse as Karl Marx and Adam Smith, along with modern thinkers such as Rosabeth Moss Kanter and Melvin Kohn, have argued that workplace experiences have a profound and systematic effect on thought and behavior. In addition, the "new structuralist" school of labor-market research (e.g., Parcel and Mueller 1983; Farkas and England 1994) suggests that features of jobs influence rewards and career prospects,

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an influence that cannot be reduced to differences in the attributes of individual job incumbents. If jobs shape thought, behavior, and life chances, then it is critical that we understand clearly the social processes whereby people are matched to jobs. To date, much of the work that has been done on the matching of people and jobs has been conducted at a fairly high level of abstraction, providing us with key insights, for example, into the importance of family background, gender, race, and education on occupational status attainment. Much less attention, however, has been directed at the hiring process itself, leaving us with few insights into why one job candidate may be preferred to other candidates with seemingly-similar qualifications.

This article aims to advance our understanding of employee selection by bringing additional evidence and conceptual clarity to two main issues. The first issue stems from the emerging literature on the character and importance of candidate "fit" for employee selection (Bills 1988; Chatman 1991; Jackall 1988; Jackson, Brett, Sessa, Cooper, Julin, and Peyronnin 1991; Kanter 1993 [1977]; Morrill 1995; Pfeffer 1989; Rynes and Gerhart 1990; Schneider 1987; Turban and Keon 1993). The concept of fit has come to assume a central role in the study of employee selection and advancement in modern workplaces. For example, several major sociological studies of corporate life (Jackall 1988; Kanter 1993 [1977]; Moore 1962; Morrill 1995) conclude that managers strive to surround themselves with those who "fit in" and who are the "right sort of person." Rynes and Gerhart (1990, p. 28) note that their study of applicant fit was prompted by the frequency with which company recruiters explained their employee-selection decisions in terms of fit. Pfeffer (1989, p. 386) states that "the idea of 'fit' is mentioned extraordinarily frequently" by corporate recruiters and job applicants. Chatman (1991, p. 461) notes that employee selection appears to be based in large part on criteria such as "personal chemistry, values, and personality traits."

While those studies have highlighted the empirical importance of fit for employee selection, the conceptualization of fit remains underdeveloped. Previous studies are clear in suggesting that fit is not just another name for general employability across employers; nor can it be reduced to standard forms of knowledge, skill, ability, or past accomplishments.¹ One important issue that remains unclear is the level at which fit operates. Some writers advance what we call an applicant-organization level of fit. This conceptualization of fit involves an assessment of the extent to which job candidates match up with the employing organization's strategies, values, norms, and culture (e.g., Rynes and Gerhart 1990; Chatman 1991). From this point of view, differences across interviewers in the same organization are attributed to interviewer "errors" that stem from the difficulty of con-

ducting an interview and assessing candidate qualifications and traits. Others conceptualize fit as being tethered to the work group, not the organization as a whole. Bills (1988), in particular, but also Kanter (1993 [1977]), Jackall (1988), and Morrill (1995), suggest that an applicant must also fit with the person or persons with whom he or she will interview and work, not just with organization-level norms and culture. This level of fit, which we call applicant-interviewer fit, appears to be just as important—if not more important—than applicant-organization fit in shaping the selection of employees. Our empirical analysis and discussion thus serve to clarify the conceptualization of fit.

Our second aim is to explore the role of candidate skill in the selection process. In focusing attention on the character of fit and the role it plays in the selection of new employees, some writers have suggested that a candidate's skill plays little independent role in the selection process *once fit has been taken into account*. For example, Kanter (1993 [1977], p. 54) argues that uncertainty in organizations sets in motion a chain of events that leads to the selection of workers on the basis of social similarity. In her analysis (see also Jackall 1988, and Morrill 1995, for similar arguments), social and interpersonal skills are the keys to effective performance on the job (pp. 57-58). Social and interpersonal skills, in turn, are proxied in the employee-selection process by social similarities. Assessments of fit based on social similarity thus become synonymous with assessments of the likelihood that a candidate can “do the job.” In short, fit is skill. This line of argument implies that aspects of skill and previous experience that cannot be reduced to social similarity play only a minor role in the selection of new employees.

We argue that Kanter's analysis—and those similar to it—errs in overlooking the important and independent role played by skill in the selection process. Our evidence suggests that employers use general credentials and experience to shape the composition of candidate pools. To make the “short list,” then, candidates need to meet certain very general requirements regarding experience (e.g., three to five years in a particular line of work or organizational setting) and education (e.g., a college or professional degree). Once a candidate pool is formed, most candidates are relatively homogeneous with respect to general skills and experiences, and they cease to play much of a role in the actual selection of a new hire. What becomes important at this point are what headhunters call “hot buttons.” Hot buttons are highly particular—if not idiosyncratic—skills and experiences that are sought in a new hire but which are not generally known to job candidates. They serve as markers of a candidate's ability to do *the* job, not just *a* job of the sort being filled. Importantly, our evidence suggests that hot buttons are not reducible to social similarities or fit, hence leaving an important and independent role for skill in the employee-selection process.

We explore these issues by drawing upon our qualitative study of headhunters—variously referred to as recruiters, private employment agents, executive recruiters, and executive search consultants.² Three general aspects of the social organization of headhunting render it an important vantage point from which to study employee selection. First, headhunters introduce job candidates to employers and endeavor to stay between the two parties in an effort to facilitate and broker discussions and negotiations. They gain an insider's view of how employers conduct interviews and interpret and evaluate the attributes and behavior of job candidates. Unlike employers, headhunters have no obvious reason to make the employee-selection *process* appear rational, even if it is not. Nor do headhunters have any reason to make employee-selection *decisions* appear to be based purely on merit, even if they are not.³ Second, nearly all headhunters nowadays (and virtually all of those in our study) are paid by employers and earn a fee only when they make a placement. That arrangement gives headhunters a strong monetary incentive to become rather astute students of employee selection. In practice, that means that they strive to learn everything they can about what an employer seeks in a new hire and who will be evaluating candidates. And third, headhunters are in fact an integral component of the employee-selection process when employers choose to use their services. They learn about the preferences of employers and then identify and present candidates who would appear to fit the employer's needs. They are not, then, merely well-situated to serve as informants about employee-selection practices. Rather, they are active participants whose understandings of employer preferences and behavior are empirically consequential. A study of headhunters thus offers an intriguing vantage point from which to gain insights into the selection of a broad range of white collar employees.

The balance of the article unfolds in four sections. The first section contains a description of the evidence we draw upon in this article. The second explores how headhunters understand fit and skill and the roles those two factors play in the selection of new employees. The third section contains a broader discussion of the results while the fourth and final section presents some conclusions.

THE EVIDENCE

Published literature on headhunters includes only a few kiss-and-tell accounts by industry insiders (e.g., Sibbald 1992; Cole 1985), a dated though insightful study by Martinez (1976), and numerous passing references to the presence of headhunters in the labor market (e.g., Granovetter 1995

[1974]; Hirsch 1993). Scholarly neglect of headhunters contrasts sharply with their prominent role in the labor market. The main industry newsletter for headhunters claims that headhunters fill between 10 and 20 percent of positions that draw from the external labor market (e.g., *The Fordyce Letter*, July 1989). While it is difficult to get an independent confirmation of the percentage of positions filled by headhunters, those figures correspond well with the results of the recent National Organizations Survey, which indicated that between 13 and 20 percent of firms used private employment agencies “frequently” to find a wide variety of workers (Kalleberg, Knoke, Marsden, and Spaeth 1996, p. 137-38). Those percentages appear to be on the rise for upper-level managerial positions and possibly for others as well. James Kennedy, editor and publisher of another popular industry newsletter, *Executive Recruiter News*, claimed that in 1989 employers used headhunters to fill roughly 30 percent of top-level managerial positions, up from 15 percent in 1979 (as cited by Brown 1989, p. 27).

Headhunters recruit employees for a wide range of positions in a wide range of companies. The salary range of positions filled by headhunters we observed and interviewed is enormous, beginning with jobs paying as little as \$12,000 a year and continuing up to positions paying \$100,000 a year. Virtually all of the positions are white collar and include various levels and types of administrative support, accounting, engineering, sales, data processing, construction (though not laborers), and insurance, to name just a few. The companies that used the headhunters we interviewed and observed include small professional practices and family businesses that lack specialized “human resources” departments; they also include many large corporations, some of which are among the largest corporations in the world.⁴

Our data collection efforts were limited to headhunters who find workers for permanent (as opposed to contract or temporary) positions and who work on “contingency.” A contingency headhunter is paid a fee by the hiring company—called the client—when one of the headhunter’s candidates is “placed” (or, from the company’s perspective, hired). Fees are *contingent* upon placements; costs incurred during a search are thus not recovered unless the headhunter is successful in making a placement. A fee that amounts to roughly one percent per thousand dollars of first-year’s salary (up to a maximum of 30 percent) is the industry base-line fee. Our study thus does not include retained search firms that require a fee prior to initiating a search, charge the fee even if a candidate is not hired, and typically work on only top-level searches for positions which pay, most generally, in excess of \$100,000 a year.

The two prongs of the evidence drawn upon in this article include interviews and fieldwork.⁵ The interviews were conducted between 1993

and 1996 with headhunters working out of a major metropolitan area in the southeastern United States (which we shall refer to as Southern City). We completed 34 one- to three-hour semi-structured interviews with headhunters, all but one of which was tape recorded and transcribed. Only one request for an interview was ultimately refused. The interviewees were randomly selected by area of specialization from the members' directory of the state association of contingency headhunting firms. The interviewees represented 31 different firms and consisted of 24 white males, 8 white females, and 2 black males. Eleven interviewees were "solo practitioners" in one-person firms.

The interviews were conducted at the headhunter's place of business. In the interviews we explored their careers and work as headhunters, including the development of clients, the discovery of candidates, and the matching of clients with candidates. In addition, we focused on their decision making, including how and why they chose to place only certain kinds of workers or service only particular industries, the criteria they used for deciding whether to undertake a search, and how they distinguished strong from weak candidates. In virtually every interview, headhunters spoke at some length with little or no prompting about factors that influenced the selection of employees.

We also conducted over 300 hours of fieldwork. This took two main forms. We spent approximately 150 hours at five different headhunting firms, observing and talking to headhunters on the job. The firms consisted of one large organization (over 100 headhunters), three small companies (three to five headhunters), and one solo practitioner. We used these settings to observe the daily activities of headhunters. Much of this involved listening to the headhunter's side of telephone conversations—conversations they would often explain or interpret for us once a call ended. Our second fieldwork site consisted of the various seminars, lectures, luncheons, training sessions, and conferences sponsored by the state and national associations of contingency headhunters. These conferences and other events allowed us to hear well-known speakers from the industry address various aspects of headhunting and to talk with the headhunters who were in attendance. Over the four-year span of the project, our presence at Southern City events became an opportunity to both meet and speak with headhunters we had not yet encountered as well as an opportunity to follow up with those we had interviewed, observed on the job, or met at one or more previous events. In both fieldwork settings we either took extensive notes during the course of the observation or, when that was not possible, as soon as the situation permitted (no later than a couple of hours afterwards). All fieldnotes were entered as text documents on our computers within one day of the fieldwork.

Two aspects of our analysis and presentation of the evidence should be noted. First, our analytic strategy was to identify what we saw as the most common and theoretically important ways headhunters viewed the employee-selection process. Our focus here on the role and character of fit and skill in the employee-selection process is not an attempt to force our evidence to speak to issues that have already surfaced in the literature. In contrast, it quickly became obvious that the matter of candidate selection was a highly salient issue for headhunters; moreover, headhunters saw fit and skill as central to candidate selection. Second, our presentation of the evidence is couched in terms of observations and interpretations that tend to be *typical* of the headhunters we interviewed and observed. We do not claim that *all* headhunters express exactly the same thoughts about the ways employers select candidates. We do claim, however, that our portrait captures what is typical of the behavior and interpretations of headhunters, and points to some important aspects of the employee-selection process that have been overlooked in previous studies.

THE CHARACTER AND IMPORTANCE OF FIT AND SKILL IN THE SELECTION OF EMPLOYEES

Fit and Employee Selection

Our evidence provides strong support for the idea that employers' assessments of applicant fit are critical in determining which applicants they select. Headhunters rarely use the word "fit," *per se*. They often speak of the importance of "chemistry" and sometimes of "personality," terms used interchangeably as synonyms for what academics call fit. These terms were used to denote an employer's highly subjective evaluation of the quality and ease of interaction with a candidate. Many headhunters spoke of chemistry in terms of rapport, the sense that one can understand another—and be understood—without undue effort.

Virtually every headhunter we spoke to or observed underscored the critical importance of chemistry in the selection process. For example, one claimed that "I've found that 80 percent of every hire is chemistry, regardless of the technical specs." Another put the estimate somewhat lower: "Let's face it, out of a placement if you were to break it down to a hundred percent of it, the technical side of it represents fifty percent. Once you get that, the rest is personality." Most headhunters spoke of chemistry in more general terms, suggesting that it is *the* key to hiring decisions. The following description of the role of chemistry is typical:

Every, every, every placement is a chemistry placement. And don't let anybody ever tell you any different, okay. You can put three people or four people in front of somebody, and they're going to hire the one that they have that rapport with, all other things being equal. If they're all qualified, they all have the degrees, the background, the skill level that they're looking for, they're going to go with the one that they feel the best about; and that's chemistry. And that's the thing that's the crucial element.

It is important to stress that education, experience, and skill were not dismissed by this or any other headhunter we interviewed or observed. Those factors play an important role in shaping the composition of the candidate pool. They also enter the selection decision in the form of "hot buttons," a topic we explore in a later section. What this headhunter stresses, however, is that if a pool contains two or more qualified candidates, then it is chemistry, not qualifications *per se*, that determines which one gets the nod.

Chemistry operates at two basic levels. The first level implies that *organizations* have particular cultures, norms, or strategies with which applicants will need to mesh (e.g., Rynes and Gerhart 1990; Chatman 1991). Fit or chemistry at this level implies an *applicant-organization* compatibility. Consider first the idea that someone who might be qualified to perform a given line of work might fit well with one organization but badly with another. Headhunters argue that most employers list various "specs" (short for specifications) that must be met in order for a person to be given even initial consideration. For example, a headhunter who specializes in restaurant and retail positions described the specs for a position he was trying to fill as requiring two years of experience as a general manager of a Houston's or a TGI Friday's restaurant (or some other restaurant with at least a million dollars in sales). Candidates with that background may nonetheless be unsuitable in the employer's eyes because they do not fit the organizational culture:

The owner of some restaurants that we will go to, man they drill, they're like drill sergeants, and that's what they want. They want someone who's going to whip these waitresses and waiters into shape, and come hell or high water, it's my way or the highway. These other restaurants, you know, hey, we want to be happy and be fun. We do this and we do that, and when someone makes a mistake we want to retrain them. Well, you send that military guy to that kind of company, well, this guy's way off base. Well, what do you mean? He's got the specs. It's not going to work.

In this case, applicant-organization fit hinges on what might be called managerial orientation. A laid-back style would fit in some cases but not in others. Owners appear to be the main decision-makers in the restaurants with which this headhunter works; in those workplaces, new hires must fit the owner's preferred managerial orientation.

In other situations, fit at the applicant-organization level can involve ways of thinking and acting that are more subtle than a particular managerial orientation. Jackall's (1988) discussion of the importance of taken-

for-granted understandings clearly represents a more complicated and subtle form of fit than is suggested by an employer's self-conscious preference for candidates who embrace a particular managerial orientation. In his analysis of managers, Jackall described as the "critical virtue" a manager's ability to make others "feel comfortable" through an "easy predictable familiarity that comes from sharing taken-for-granted frameworks about how the world works" (1988, p. 56). A second example of applicant-organization fit emphasizes the importance of these more subtle taken-for-granted frameworks:

There are just certain tendencies that companies will make. So you start to develop that correlation where if you're trained this way, this company, that training is a dead fit over here. Part of it is knowing how many people over the years have taken, let's call it strategic positions in there, therefore, the philosophies of the companies become the same, so when the guy interviews, it's like he's reading the textbook back to them. They feel very comfortable. They like them.

The notion of "comfort" expressed by this headhunter is quite similar to the idea of comfort in Jackall's analysis. In this case, however, comfort stems from similar corporate backgrounds, not social similarity, a factor that tends to dominate Jackall's discussion.

Headhunters suggest that a second level at which chemistry operates may be at least as important in the selection process as the compatibility between an applicant and an organization's culture and norms. Headhunters routinely seek out information about both the organization *and* the person or persons who will be conducting the interview and making the selection decision (headhunters call the decision maker the "hiring authority"). They collect information on the interviewers because they believe that the candidate must develop good chemistry with these people in order to have any chance of being selected. Fit at this *applicant-interviewer* level has two main components. The first centers on the personality traits of the interviewers and, especially, of the hiring authority. Similar personalities, in short, are thought to enhance applicant-interviewer chemistry. Consider one headhunter's discussion of the importance of personality traits for applicant-interviewer chemistry:

We're trying to find a personality match. If I have a very nebbish character [a hiring authority], he's very introverted and I'm dealing with a guy [a potential candidate] who's very extroverted on the other side, well that's not going to work. Why waste my time even if he's qualified. ... Likes hire likes. So much for diversity. Likes hire likes. That's reality. But I try to get somebody who has similar features, similar background, similar personality as the person who's interviewing them. That's the ideal goal if you can do it.

This statement is especially important in light of the fact that it was made by a headhunter who places highly technical computer specialists whose "personalities" would not appear to be directly related to effective per-

formance on the job. Nonetheless, “nebbishness” is a trait that will enhance fit—and hence employability—in this *particular* company with this *particular* hiring authority.

The second component of fit at the applicant-interviewer level involves a variety of background experiences and current traits and interests that may help a candidate to establish and maintain rapport with the interviewers and the hiring authority. These traits are more strongly connected to social similarity than they are to personality, although there is some overlap between the two. Consider a headhunter’s description of the kinds of non-work-related characteristics he believes are important in generating good applicant-interviewer chemistry:

I’m looking at what you do on the weekends, family, do you play golf, do you play tennis, do you like to read? Try to find out as much as I can because people hire people just like themselves. That is an absolute truth in this business. If you sit across from me and your background is very similar to my background, we kind of had the same things growing up, I’m going to gravitate to you faster than I’m going to gravitate to some guy who lived in Boston all his life or New York, or Philadelphia, or San Francisco.

It is important to underscore here the same point that we made about personality traits. Namely, headhunters are emphatic in saying that attributes and experiences that enhance a candidate’s likelihood of establishing good chemistry with one organization and hiring authority might represent neutral traits—or chemistry killers—at a different organization or with a different hiring authority.

Demographic and physical traits shape both applicant-organization and applicant-interviewer fit. Some headhunters revealed and discussed selection criteria relevant to assessments of fit that were discriminatory and sometimes illegal. These appeared most often in the form of concerns about a candidate’s age and appearance. Client preferences regarding appearance and age are often unstated and thus inferred by headhunters, a point made by a headhunter who places sales representatives:

My companies don’t openly come out and say, “Don’t send me someone like you.” I mean, they’d have no interest in looking at a 42-year-old, receding-hair-line, five-foot, four-inch guy. I’m not saying they openly discriminate, but if it came down to a 28 year old walking in the door or me, the 28 year old is going to get the job 19 out of 20 times. And these companies that I work for don’t openly say, “I will not look at this person.” But they often find reasons to knock the candidate out.

Headhunters claimed that there were times when they would decide not to present otherwise-qualified candidates for positions because employers were likely to rule them out because they were an “inappropriate age” (for the most part “too old”) or, as one headhunter exclaimed, “like me—short and dumpy.” In other cases, they would present such candidates, expect

the worst, and then cloak the employer's real selection criteria should that be necessary:

If they [a candidate] come in and they're five-foot, five-inches tall and 175 pounds, I will go to the employer and say, "I have met this person and this is what they look like." And I know the employer's going to knock him out, but at least that's not me playing God. I let them do it. And I've got to gently go back to the candidate and say, "There's now an internal candidate who has surfaced that they're looking at strongly."

In the mind of this headhunter, a candidate who was "short and dumpy" would generate no chemistry for the types of sales jobs he filled.

While many headhunters mentioned the importance of age and appearance during our interviews and fieldwork, we uncovered no direct references to links between gender, race, and assessments of candidate fit. Race and gender surfaced for the most part in discussions of what headhunters called "diversity searches." Headhunters claimed that many of their clients would explicitly state that they wanted a "diversity candidate," which tended to be defined in racial and ethnic terms rather than gender, in order to boost counts of such employees. As one headhunter put it, "It's a numbers thing. There aren't many [minority candidates] out there. Their [an employer's] EEOC counts are down. That's where the search will be." Importantly, this and other similar comments suggest that corporate demand for white-collar minorities stems from external pressure. Pressure of that sort may subvert the explicit use of gender and race as proxies for likely fit.⁶

In a few situations, gender and race appeared to shape assessments of fit in a subtle, indirect fashion. A few headhunters discussed a candidate's "image" and likely fit in terms that were not inclusive of all races, ethnicities, and genders. As one put it, a successful candidate is "going to have a certain image—he's going to look a certain way." Apart from the use of a male pronoun to denote a generic candidate, this comment links the idea of an "image" to a particular "appearance."⁷ This same headhunter went on to explain that a particular employer's "image" requirement—namely, that the candidate have a "commanding presence"—meant in practice that successful candidates tended to stand about six feet, two inches tall, weigh about 175 pounds, and have dark hair and blue eyes. While gender, race, and ethnicity did not surface in his discussion of image, tall, blue-eyed candidates are more likely than not to be white men, not women or people of color.

Gender and race are likely to shape assessments of fit in yet another indirect and subtle way that may elude observation. Though we have no direct evidence from our study to support this contention, we suspect that gender and race are often linked to various social experiences and back-

grounds that are key to the establishment of social similarities and hence fit. For example, many headhunters spoke of the highly “athletic” character of some hiring authorities and work groups, and how older and overweight candidates would be unlikely to fit well with such people and contexts. We suspect, but were unable to document, that settings of that sort induce a gender bias, favoring men who, on the average, are more likely than women to participate in—and be involved spectators of—a wide range of athletic endeavors. In selecting on various dimensions of social similarity, therefore, employers and headhunters are likely to perpetuate indirectly inequalities along the lines of gender and race.

Analyses of the character and role of fit thus highlight a criterion that headhunters claim is at the very center of employee selection. Put simply, headhunters were unequivocal in maintaining that “people hire people just like themselves.” To overlook the role of fit is thus to overlook what is perhaps the main mechanism by which social advantage and disadvantage become solidified in what Kanter (1993 [1977]) called the “homosocial reproduction of labor.”

Skill and Employee Selection

Analyses of fit tend to imply that once a pool of candidates is formed the selection of one or more new hires hinges solely on personality and social attributes, not on skills or experiences relevant to the position being filled that cannot be reduced in some fashion to fit. Several recent studies, along with those of Kanter (1993 [1977]), Jackall (1988), and Morrill (1995), suggest that certain personality and social attributes *are* the skills sought in new hires. As a whole, these studies suggest that personality traits are incorporated directly into the labor process in some jobs and organizations and thus become indicators of an individual’s ability to “do the job” at the time of employee selection (e.g., Darrah 1994; Holzer 1996; Leidner 1993; Moss and Tilly 1996). It is thus plausible, from this point of view, to argue that fit serves as an indicator of the skills employers seek in new hires, leaving little if any role for an assessment of other experiences or talents that might shape a new hire’s ability to “do the job.”

We argue that in many situations assessments of skill cannot be wholly—or even largely—reduced to assessments of a candidate’s likely fit. That position is consistent with Bills’s (1988) research on the ways work experience, job performance, and technical expertise shape the selection of new employees. Bills found that those factors were used more often than any others by employers to narrow the applicant pool and to select a new hire. Employers appeared to distinguish personality traits (which

were also found to be important in selection decisions) from assessments of previous work experience, job performance, and technical expertise. What was critical, however, was not *general* labor-market experience, but rather highly *specific* forms of skill and experience. Bills's findings suggest that many employers look for evidence that a job candidate "can do the job" and that such evidence need not be identical to an assessment of fit.

The evidence on this point is clear and consistent: skill and experience requirements were not dismissed by *any* headhunter in our study. This pattern is particularly meaningful because headhunters—unlike employers—have no obvious reason to claim that skill and experience (which are generally seen as fair selection criteria) play an important role in the hiring process. The difficulty, however, in saying that skill and experience matter is that employers tend to describe skill and experience requirements in very general terms in position descriptions and announcements—in the position's "specs." A position's specs are likely to reveal little more than the position's title, its salary (or salary range), formal educational requirements, and the number of years of work experience in the same or a related field that are required. For example, a headhunter who places engineers described a recent search assignment for which an employer stated the following specs: three to five years' experience in machine design in a high-volume manufacturing environment, supervisory experience, an ME degree, and a starting salary of \$45,000. The headhunter claimed that specs like these "tell me nothing" because they neither identify which attributes or traits will enhance chemistry nor indicate the most relevant experience- and skill-based selection criteria.

Headhunters claim that while specs play an important role in determining the composition of the pool of viable candidates, they fail to provide enough information to guide the selection of one candidate over another when two or more candidates meet the specs. Given the conviction that "there are a number of qualified people for most positions," headhunters suggest that specs are best understood as a *negative* aspect of selection because they help determine who will not be chosen. Offers hinge upon an employer's assessment of two *positive* selection criteria: chemistry (i.e., fit) and hot buttons.

Hot buttons are highly specific skills and experiences that produce a *positive* reaction on the part of a given employer. Unlike specs, hot buttons are not baseline experiences or skills expected of all viable candidates; rather, they are talents or skills that give a particular employer reason to become sufficiently enthusiastic about a particular candidate to extend an offer. One headhunter usefully defined hot buttons as the "solution to the problem that motivated the employer to seek to fill the position." Another defined them in terms of skills and experiences that would meet an em-

ployer's "dire need." Hot buttons need not be particularly complicated or nuanced. For example, the hot buttons for the engineering position mentioned above turned out to be successful experience in designing jigs and fixtures and performing vendor quality audits. Hot buttons are often context specific. They vary widely across positions, departments, companies, and over time for even the most narrowly defined occupational specialties.

In some cases, hot buttons depend more on the hiring authority than on the job. Headhunters claim that certain hiring authorities look for particular types of experiences and skills in *all* the candidates they interview, making hot buttons specific to the hiring authority rather than the position.

When I'm working with a brand new manager I've never worked with I don't have an established relationship so I'm not going to know what the hot buttons are for that person. So what I'll do is say, "Listen, I understand what your company Johnson & Johnson wants. I understand the profile. Tell me about you, what are you looking for?" What I do is I make up a profile. I say, Bill Smith [a pseudonym] with Johnson & Johnson has, this is what his hot buttons are so anybody I send to him I need to make sure that they're prepared to either show examples or deal with this when he turns around and asks it.

This headhunter then went on to say that the hot buttons included how you prefer to manage your people, accounts, and discretionary funds; how you develop new business and the careers of your people; and what kind of computer systems you know. What is clear from his statement is that there are hot buttons "for Bill Smith" and that candidates will need to press those hot buttons.

Hot buttons can be more *unclear* than *unstated*. On occasion, the specs will contain a laundry list of experiences and skills, not all of which are equally important in the eyes of a hiring authority. Headhunters typically ask hiring authorities to list the most important attributes they seek in a new hire. A headhunter explained how he probes to learn about hot buttons:

Meade will send you very lengthy job descriptions and she [an HR staffer] has in every case here. What I found, though, and maybe it's just on my part, that they are very boring. What I find is it's better for me to talk to the hiring authority and say, "Look, what are the three or four most important things to you in evaluating whether this person's going to be right?" You find out what are the nuances as far as terminology for the job and then you focus on, "Okay, what's really important to you?"

An important aspect of this headhunter's statement is that he finds it useful to bypass his contact in the company's human resources department and to speak directly with the hiring authority. Position descriptions are rarely viewed as credible indicators of what is sought in candidates; nor do those descriptions—or staff members in human resources—help headhunters to prioritize selection criteria. Many headhunters believe that those in human resources are too far removed from the job and the hiring authority to

understand the hot buttons and chemistry that will be required of a new hire. This headhunter's strategy of contacting the hiring authority to find out "what's really important" represents an opportunity to probe for hot buttons as well as issues related to fit.

Our evidence thus suggests that the screening and selection of job candidates *is* influenced in part by assessments of skill that are not wholly or even largely reducible to fit. Put simply, fit does not totally dominate the selection of new employees. Our evidence suggests that the specific experiences and skills employers seek in candidates may not be obvious from a position's officially-stated requirements or specs. Candidates who possess the experiences and skills mentioned in the specs may or may not have what the employer seeks. The existence of "hidden" or "unstated" experience and skill requirements might make it *appear* as though screening and selection decisions are not guided by assessments of skill or experience, but a conclusion of that sort would be mistaken.⁸

DISCUSSION AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

In this section, we discuss two main implications of the evidence and analysis presented thus far on the character and importance of fit and skill in the employee-selection process. The first centers on the conceptualization, causes, and implications of fit. The second involves some thoughts on how the importance of fit and hot buttons may limit the predictive power of standard, variable-oriented accounts of labor-market success.

The Conceptualization, Causes, and Implications of Fit

Our evidence provides support for the idea that both applicant-organization and applicant-interviewer fit play an important role in employee selection. In light of its relative neglect in the literature on fit, it is important to consider why applicant-interviewer fit might be so crucial to employee selection and what it might imply for students of labor markets and organizations.

A tentative answer to the matter of why applicant-interviewer fit looms so large in the selection process can be found in scholarship on trust in organizations and the social psychology of inter-group relations. Social similarities tend to produce what has been called *depersonalized* (Brewer 1981) or *characteristic-based* trust (Zucker 1986). For example, recent research on the character and production of trust in organizations suggests that there are norms of obligation and cooperation rooted in social similarity (Creed

and Miles 1996). Creed and Miles argue that these norms create the “expectation that a person can or cannot be trusted because of family background, age, social or financial situation, ethnicity, and so forth” (p. 18). In a similar fashion, Zucker (1986, p. 61) argues that people tend to assume that those who are socially similar will hold similar “background understandings” that will facilitate interaction and enhance the likelihood that the outcome of negotiations and exchanges will be satisfactory to both parties.

While social similarities may well influence assessments of trustworthiness, and hence employability, they are also likely to shape the evaluation of a candidate in a more subtle fashion. Kramer, Brewer, and Hanna (1996, p. 367) review research on group processes which finds that people tend to evaluate socially-similar others in relatively positive terms. Moreover, causal attributions about others’ dispositions, motives, and intentions are influenced by social similarities. For example, evaluators can attribute undesirable or negative behaviors to external and unstable factors or to internal and stable factors. Research suggests that evaluators who are socially similar to the person being evaluated are more likely than those who lack that social similarity to attribute negative or undesirable behaviors to external and unstable factors (Kramer et al. 1996, p. 368). What is particularly important about these evaluative processes is that evaluators often appear to be completely unaware of their in-group bias. A hiring authority’s *evaluation* of candidates is thus likely to be influenced by the perception of social similarities in a way that goes beyond the matter of trustworthiness discussed above (for evidence that supports this claim see Baron and Pfeffer 1994, p. 194; Lin, Dobbins, and Farh 1992; Rand and Wexley 1975).

The importance of fit in the selection of new employees has two rather somber implications for workplace diversity. Some scholars have painted what we believe to be an overly-optimistic view of the possibility of achieving diversity in the workplace. For example, Kanter (1993 [1977], p. 54) argued that managers’ desire for socially-similar others in the workplace—what she called the homosocial reproduction of labor—was directly correlated with the “uncertainty quotient” in organizational roles (see also Pfeffer 1989, for a similar argument about uncertainty). Uncertainty, according to her argument, increases reliance on trust and personal discretion and leads to the selection of workers on the basis of social similarity. If uncertainty can be reduced, then the “closed circle” can be opened.

Our evidence, however, does not support Kanter’s hypothesis that the desire for socially-similar candidates varies substantially across different types of white collar jobs or over a wide range of employers.⁹ With the exception of a few cases in which an employer was desperate to hire someone with uncommon technical skills, virtually no Southern City headhunter

even hinted at the possibility that there were hiring situations in which applicant-interviewer fit was not critical—if not *the* key—to the selection decision. This pattern may stem from the unconscious social-psychological processes discussed above that shape the evaluation of job candidates. Our sense is that those processes are difficult to alter and hence serve to undermine efforts to diversify workplaces.

A second implication is that headhunters surely serve to perpetuate the tendency for “likes to hire likes.” Headhunters, after all, strongly *believe* that social similarities are key to selection decisions. From the headhunter’s point of view, the ideal search assignment is one in which they quickly and effortlessly identify and present a single candidate who is a dead ringer in the eyes of the hiring authority. The workaday world of contingency headhunting, however, is far from that ideal, and headhunters often end up presenting candidates who lack some of the desired experiences and skills and/or fall short of being socially similar to the hiring authority. In practice, then, headhunters do not present *only* socially-similar candidates to employers. Their theory of employer selection decisions, however, leads them to work toward that end, *possibly even in situations in which social similarity might not be a selection criterion*. In that situation, a headhunter’s theory of selection would serve to perpetuate the use of social similarity as a selection criterion. Headhunters are thus another institutional mechanism that supports the homosocial reproduction of labor.¹⁰

Fit, Hot Buttons, and the Explanation of Labor-Market Success

Over the past couple of decades, studies of labor-market success have increasingly shifted to the idea that there are distinct labor markets in the United States (e.g., Parcel and Mueller 1983; Farkas and England 1994). One main line of demarcation is between internal and external labor markets. Even in the external labor market, however, there are thought to be distinct, non-overlapping labor markets. These distinct labor markets have two features that are particularly important. First, employers across given labor markets value and reward different worker characteristics. For example, in some labor markets, particular educational credentials are either required or very important; in others, those credentials may have little or no value. What this implies is that the importance of a variable like education for employability and labor-market success depends upon the labor-market context. A second important aspect of this conceptualization of labor markets focuses on the extent of variation within a specific labor market. Within a given labor market, the buying and selling of labor are guided by a set of criteria that are not thought to vary substantially across em-

ployers. It is thus reasonable, according to the now-conventional conceptualization of labor markets, to speak of a labor market for cost accountants in a given geographical area (thus capturing the idea of a *local* labor market for a *particular* kind of labor). In that market, the criteria that determine employability and success should not, according to the labor-market literature, vary greatly across the employers of that type of labor.

Our evidence from headhunters, however, strongly suggests that there is considerable variation in the criteria employers use to select candidates from a candidate pool. General criteria, such as education and experience, play a limited role at best. Instead, the criteria that are used to select candidates are the candidate's compatibility with a particular organization's culture, norms, and strategies, compatibility with the hiring authority and interviewers, and whether the candidate meets specific skill or experience requirements. Criteria of this sort appear to vary substantially across firms seeking the same general type of labor; further, headhunters suggest that they can also vary from one hiring authority to another *even within a single firm*. Our evidence from headhunters thus suggests that it may not be possible to speak of anything like a single set of criteria that guide the buying and selling of labor even within a narrowly defined labor-market context. In many ways, headhunters suggest an extremely radical notion of labor-market segmentation.

This finding suggests that the use of fit and hot buttons in the selection of new employees is likely to introduce some degree of "noise" or "randomness" into standard, quantitative efforts to model labor-market processes even when investigators invoke the idea of multiple labor market segments. For example, nebbishness, on the average, may have no discernible influence on individuals' chances of being selected for a job as a computer systems analyst. In that situation, the standard, variable-oriented explanatory logic would suggest that nebbishness plays no systematic role in shaping mobility patterns *even though it may be absolutely critical to the selection process for a particular job at a particular firm*. It is this element of what looks like "randomness" from the perspective of a variable-oriented explanatory logic that may well be a main cause of the relatively low explanatory power of most quantitative studies of labor-market processes.

While nebbishness on the part of a job candidate in just the right context might look like "luck" from the standpoint of a variable-oriented researcher (as in the discussion of luck in Jencks et al., 1972 and 1979), it does not look like luck from the standpoint of a headhunter who views the selection of new employees as rife with such demand-side idiosyncracies. The headhunter's job is to gather as much nuanced information as he or she can about factors relevant to fit and hot buttons. He or she then identifies and presents, for example, suitably nebbish candidates if that is what

will fit the bill. Such matchmaking activities serve to decrease the extent to which luck dominates the selection process.¹¹

CONCLUSIONS

This article represents an effort to understand better the processes by which people are matched to jobs. It has explored the selection of new employees through the eyes of headhunters, a third party to the matching process. We have argued that headhunters provide a useful vantage point from which to understand the employee-selection process. Given that contingency headhunters are paid only when one of their candidates is hired by a client company, they have a strong financial incentive to become astute students of employee selection processes and practices. Those processes and practices, however, are those of employers, not headhunters, a distinction that gives headhunters less reason than employers to portray matters as rational and meritocratic if neither of those two adjectives are warranted.

Our evidence and arguments lead to three main conclusions. First, assessments of a job candidate's likely fit play a critical role in the selection of white collar employees. Previous studies have not erred in advancing that general conclusion. Most studies that have highlighted the importance of fit have centered on managers (e.g., Kanter 1993 [1974], Jackall 1988, and Morrill 1995), leaving unclear whether fit plays an important role in the selection of other white collar employees. Our evidence, which covers a broad range of white collar employment, shows that fit is not a selection criterion unique to managers. Moreover, it is a selection criterion that is still very much in use even in the middle 1990s, many years after the introduction of various "diversity" initiatives aimed at increasing the social and cultural heterogeneity of workplaces. While Kanter's Afterword to *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1993 [1977]) suggests that workplaces are shifting "from homogeneity to diversity" and that "the managerial priority" has shifted to "managing and even affirming diversity," (1993 [1977], p. 290), one of our headhunters summed up the continuing role of fit in employee selection a bit differently: "Likes hire likes. So much for diversity." In short, social similarity remains more consequential than Kanter's recent statements imply.

A second conclusion involves specifying the levels at which fit becomes important in the selection of new employees. What we have called applicant-interviewer fit has been noted in some previous studies but overlooked by others. We speculate that this neglect may stem from two sources—namely, the perceived legitimacy of the different levels of fit and the type of evidence used in most previous studies. With respect to perceived legitimacy, Rynes and Gerhart (1990, p. 14), for example, cite a number of

sources in support of the statement that “academics and consultants have increasingly recommended that job applicants be assessed in terms of their fit with the employing organization’s strategies, culture, norms, and values.” Fit at this applicant-organization level must appear fair or legitimate for such writers to advocate using assessments of fit as a candidate-selection criterion. We suspect, however, that it might be much more difficult to view *applicant-interviewer* fit as a legitimate and legally-defensible selection criterion. In the language of Southern City headhunters, applicant-interviewer fit means that “people hire people just like themselves.” That phrase points to the importance of highly subjective, non-job-related criteria that have traditionally been viewed as discriminatory (Gutman 1993). It is quite possible that research that leans on data collected directly from employers will miss the conceptual and empirical salience of applicant-interviewer fit because company insiders may be reluctant to reveal or discuss a selection criterion that may be viewed as invalid.

A third and final conclusion centers on the importance of skill in the selection of employees. While some workplace activities may well depend upon clear communication, predictable behavior, and, in general, “getting along with others,” social skills based on fit are clearly not the only skills that employers seek. Assessments of fit during the selection process may thus serve to predict certain social skills, but those skills are not the only skills that employers consider when they evaluate the likely capabilities of job candidates. Our evidence suggests that highly specific and oftentimes rather idiosyncratic elements of skill and experience—called “hot buttons” by headhunters—play an important role in the selection of employees.

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ENDNOTES

1. One exception to this is a recent study by Bretz, Rynes, and Gerhart (1993) which suggested that corporate, campus recruiters based assessments of the likely fit of students

- mostly on the basis of job-related coursework and experience. Our hunch is that this pattern may be specific to entry-level workers making the transition from school to work.
2. We refer to them as headhunters in this article so that they are easy to distinguish from corporate "recruiters" who are employees of the hiring company. The term "headhunter" is widely used in leading newspapers and the business press; it is also the term that people in the industry use to describe themselves.
 3. An important review of research on the employment interview (Arvey and Campion 1982) provides some support the idea that employers who know their employee-selection practices are being studied may well alter their behavior and practices.
 4. We explore relationships between companies and headhunters, and the reasons a company may "externalize" the recruitment of new employees, in a separate paper (Finlay and Coverdill 1997).
 5. Our understanding of headhunting was also informed by the collection and analysis of industry newsletters such as the *Fordyce Letter* and *Executive Recruiter News*, over 100 hours of training material contained on video and audio cassettes, 98 responses to a mail survey we sent to all headhunting firms in Southern City, and interviews with 16 employers about their use of headhunters. We do not discuss that evidence in detail here because we do not draw on it explicitly in this article.
 6. An alternative hypothesis, which we doubt but cannot fully discount, is that the litigious climate surrounding the hiring of women and minorities made headhunters unwilling to discuss or reveal how race and gender operate to ensure—or kill—chemistry. Headhunters, like employers, can be sued for discrimination in hiring. We doubt that we overlooked the explicit use of gender and race in assessments of chemistry in part because we did, in fact, observe the blatantly illegal use of age as a selection criterion.
 7. The use of male pronouns for generic candidates was common among both male and female headhunters who placed workers in mixed-gender and male-dominated jobs. Conversely, headhunters who worked the market for administrative support staff, and thus placed mostly women, used female pronouns to refer to generic candidates.
 8. We do not discuss in this paper the employee's side of the matching process, which, as one reviewer noted, is equally important if the placement is to be made and the headhunter to be paid. The employee or candidate side is examined in another paper (Coverdill and Finlay 1997).
 9. It is important to note that Kanter brought no evidence to bear on this portion of her argument, leaving it a plausible—but completely untested—hypothesis.
 10. Our argument here is similar to what Larwood (1991) has termed "rational bias."
 11. Headhunters do more than merely identify and present candidates who would appear to meet the fit and hot button preferences of employers. In another article (Coverdill and Finlay 1997), we discuss how headhunters attempt to ensure that an employer will *perceive* candidate traits that are conducive to the establishment of good fit and the pressing of hot buttons. Headhunters rarely assume that some level of "objective" compatibility and skill will be enough to produce a match.

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