A positive approach to employee selection

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Abstract

This paper discusses a positive approach to employee selection utilising concepts from positive organisational behaviour. It takes a thematic approach to positive selection covering topics of being dynamic, outcomes focussed, contextual, holistic, transparent, and be a positive experience for applicants and selectors alike. The paper introduces the concepts of a dynamic view of merit and critical success factors in supporting a positive process. Data from interviews of HR managers are used to illustrate the themes. Challenges for HR managers in obtaining support to develop and implement positive selection are highlighted.

Key words: positive selection, dynamic view of merit, critical success factors, research-practice gap.

1. Introduction

The aims of this paper are to discuss a positive approach to selection as an opportunity for a holistic, outcomes based and forward focussed approach (in contrast with prevailing selection approaches); to outline a positive selection approach using a thematic approach; and, discuss how HR professionals can be influenced given the well-discussed gap between research and practice in selection.

Selection is the most important of the human resource management functions as it determines those people who are going to contribute to the organisation achieving outcomes (Boxall & Purcell, 2011; Rousseau, 2006). This paper will critically examine the prevailing approach to employee selection for Australian managers (Di Milia, 2004). Such people perform jobs that require complex decision making, leadership and influencing in contexts of resource pressures and changing circumstances. The prevailing focus on selection processes appears to be one of ‘minimising’ the likelihood of selecting a ‘poor performer’ whilst using a static and negative approach. Research supports the contention that negative information is given much more weight than positive information (Kahneman 2011). As selection decisions involve progressively moving from many applicants to those offered employment, the current approach gives less weight to positive than to negative information.

This paper takes a positive organisational behaviour (POB) approach (which is the application of positive psychology to the workplace) (Avey et al, 2011). In particular, we consider whether including such factors as psychological capital (PsyCap) in selection would add value as outcome variables such as satisfaction and commitment have been shown to be significantly related to PsyCap (Dawkins et al, 2013) and organisational citizenship behaviour or OCB (Walumba et al, 2011). It has also been
shown that PsyCap is positively related to person-organisation fit (Avey, Luthans & Youssef, 2010). In a recent meta-analysis, Psycap has been argued to be particularly relevant in positions requiring creativity, tolerance of ambiguity, the making of complex decisions and in changing or stressful environments (Peterson et al, 2011). There has been limited research in the application of PsyCap to selection with one study that found some support for hope being linked to selection performance (Zsyberb, 2012). Additionally, the concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been shown to predict positive outcomes such as well-being (Iliescu et al, 2012). EI is likely to be important in jobs that require effective relationships and appropriate use of emotions (O’Boyle et al, 2011). Overall, people with higher levels of psychological well-being are healthier and perform well in their job roles (Robertson, Birch & Cooper, 2012). Often, these factors are not included in selection processes.

How would a positive selection process add value for organisations? It would aim to encourage positive perceptions, minimise power imbalances, and increase feelings of comfort, control and choice which are important elements for optimal performance (Rock 2008). There is evidence that happier people (defined as those who frequently experience positive emotions such as joy, satisfaction, contentment, enthusiasm, and interest) are more inclined to take risks, be persistent, and pursue new goals with greater levels of inquiry (Peterson et al, 2008). A positive selection process would enable a whole learning process for all involved: applicants, ‘panel’ and organisations. We pose the question ‘What would a positive approach to selection look like”? It would have the features of being dynamic, outcomes focussed, contextual, holistic, transparent, and be a positive experience for applicants and selectors alike. We will address these themes in turn.

2. Methodology

As the purpose of this paper is to examine the selection process from a positive perspective, and is structured in a thematic manner, a qualitative approach is appropriate to discuss ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions of positive selection. The research accessed transcripts of semi-structured interviews with HR managers/specialists (Eisenhardt, 1989; König et al, 2010; Teo et al, 2008).
Twenty-six interviews were analysed from three sets of interviews: HR professionals with a primary responsibility for selection, generalist HR managers and key people from organisations who sought to adopt a positive psychology approach in their organisation. None of these sets of interviews were designed to explicitly elicit answers directly related to POB. The transcripts were analysed and coded into the key themes that reflect a positive approach to selection. Given the qualitative nature, the analysis focussed on illustration and relevance rather than frequencies (Becker & Geer, 1982). The interviewees are identified by number as follows:

- HR professions (R1 to R12);
- Generalist HR mangers (R13 to R20); and
- Respondents with a positive psychology approach (R21 to R26)

3. A positive approach to selection

This section will discuss the six themes identified in the introduction, with key points illustrated by quotes from the interviewees.

3.1 A dynamic approach to selection

‘Weak companies hire the right experience to do the job. Strong companies hire the right person to join their team’ (Sinek, 2013).

In simple terms, the primary purpose of a selection process is to predict future performance (predictive validity), particularly whether applicants who score highly perform better. Dowling and Dickinson, 1987 argued that an important aspect from a practitioner perspective is a selection process to minimise poor predictions of performance: false positives (where a “poor performer” is selected) and false negatives (where a “superior performer” is rejected). This can be illustrated as set out below in Figure 1:

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We want to make sure that they can contribute and we can invest in them to continue to deliver.” R19

The current understanding of merit is ‘static’ in neither recognising changing needs of an organisation nor the ability to develop as a member of staff. That is, an applicant is to be measured on a set of
existing criteria and how they relate to an existing position. With a dynamic and strategic approach to selection these static constructs of existing qualities for a particular position are challenged.

A positive approach to selection aims to select people who will add the most value to the organisation. It is therefore focussed on future performance rather than current capability. Whilst there has been some movement towards selecting the ‘right’ person for the organisation rather than the ‘best’ person for the job, the focus in selection has been on who is currently the most meritorious candidate. As assessing an applicant’s potential requires a different approach to designing and measuring criteria, a more dynamic view of the merit principle is required. We have called this approach ‘a dynamic view of merit’. This is consistent with strategic selection that links selection activities with the organisation’s future strategic objectives and workplace culture. The dynamic view of merit values future potential above past and current performance. The reason for this refocus is that positions are typically dynamic, changing in response to the particular demands of an organisation at any given time. So the questions in assessing applicants are: “...will they be right for the role; will they be right for the team; will they be right for the organisation. Not only today, but tomorrow and also in six and 12 months, or two years’ time?” R19

In typical selection processes, merit is assessed on ‘…abilities, qualifications, experience, standard of work performance and personal qualities relevant to job performance’ (O’Leary et al, 2002, p2). This is a static approach that does not fully assess the changing nature of the organisation or the potential of the applicants. It also favours those applicants already performing in a particular capacity. The dynamic view of merit not only benefits the future of the organisation but also potentially addresses issues of equity and access. The dynamic view of merit can be illustrated diagrammatically.

(Insert Figure 2 about here)

The vertical axis is capacity and the horizontal axis is time. C is the required performance standard to begin the position and A and B are two applicants. If a person is to be employed for a short period of time then A would be the most meritorious as they have existing skills relevant to the organisational demands, but if the employee is expected to remain for some time, then the future capacity of applicant B is greater. In changing organisations, the competency expectation levels over time
increase and at some time in the future person A may not only be a lesser performer than B but also below the organisation’s performance requirements.

3.2 An outcomes focus

The concept of merit selection requires the use of an appropriate and defendable set of criteria against which to select candidates. Typically selection criteria are written around knowledge, skills and attributes (KSAs) and assessed individually. However, in undertaking job roles, people use a range of KSAs to produce results. In the context of a positive approach to selection, we pose the question that ‘if the selection outcome was successful, what would the employee have achieved over a reasonable designated period’? This period may be different for different types of positions and different organisations. This approach defines those outcomes as critical success factors (CSF’s). Assessing CSFs requires a broader approach that differs from a focus on narrowly defined knowledge and skills (Capelli, 2012). Two examples of this approach in practice are: ‘My tendency as an HR professional is to go with someone who shows potential rather than someone who’s kind of been plateauing ...’ R17, and ‘I’ve had a focus in creating selection criteria which much more focuses on the subjective factors and those people factors ... getting away from that very rigid (so called) objective type criteria that a lot of firms work through.’ R16

From an evidenced based perspective, it is also important to assess each CSF using at least two techniques. This avoids the potential problem of ‘selecting out’ an applicant based on information from a single source that may not be accurate or appropriate in the context of the specific position. A template for this approach is shown as Figure 3.

(Insert figure 3 about here).

3.3 Contextual factors (integrating person-team fit and person-organisation fit)

There has been an increased emphasis on P-O fit which focuses on broader value-based characteristics such as: adaptability, conscientiousness, team-orientation and responsibility, rather than on capabilities required to undertake a specific job role (O’Leary et al, 2002; Scroggins, Thomas &
Morris, 2008). There is a view that organisations should … “Be focused on values from the

Actual fit is assessed by comparing independent measures of workers’ values and their perception of
the organization’s values, whereas perceived fit is conceptualized as an individual’s overall judgement
about the extent to which they perceive a fit with the organization. P–O fit is assumed to have
important implications for employees’ well-being and various organizational outcomes, as it affects
central attitudes and behaviour of people in the workplace (van Vuuren et al, 2007). There is also an
increased focus on person-team (P-T) fit (Burch & Anderson, 2004). Two relevant examples of fit in
practice are: “We are looking for attitude and cultural fit with the team”, R2 and,

‘The first port of call is to make sure they fit within that team. Second port of call is make sure your
team is aligned with the organisation because if you just create your team and its misaligned with the
organisation that is going to be misaligned for forever and that person will never be aligned to the
organisation because it started off unaligned’. R16

One key reason for the focus on P-T and P-O fit is that applicants who are high on these factors will
be able more quickly adapt and perform in their new role; for example:

Fit into an organisation to me is paramount. Core competencies are very important. However we can
always up skill, and we can if with got the right organisational fit. If someone can almost hit the
ground running, we can teach them and take them through everything else that we need. R14

A reason for a focus on these personal, values based attributes is that these are seen as difficult to
change whilst skills and knowledge can be developed on the job (Bartram, 2004). Chew & Chan
(2008) found that organisational commitment of incumbents and intention to stay was significantly
positively affected by P-O fit. A person’s set of values is an element of fit and research on selecting
for values fit (compatibility between personal and organisational values) found that values fit
indicates longer length of service (retention) and higher displays of Organisational Citizenship
Behaviour (OCB) (Rynes, Colbert & Brown, 2002). For example some firms seek:

...a demonstrated ability to learn and a fundamental understanding from which to build on its really
fit with the business and fleshing out that ability to learn and continuing to learn and shape their
knowledge with the organisation that is something that is going to give long-term benefit both to the
applicant and the organisation R13.
3.4 A holistic approach

A holistic approach to recruitment has 3 dimensions, those of the individual, the HR system and the organisation. Individuals bring their own unique balance of strengths to their jobs and actively craft their roles to bring about increased engagement, job satisfaction and workplace fit (Berg, Dutton & Wrzeniewski 2008). In assessing an applicant against the CSFs, it is important to look at their whole range of capabilities, potential and how they can craft a role, not just their paid work history. An appropriate range of selections techniques are required to enable a considered judgement of applicants against the CSFs. This can reduce the domination of weight given to interview performance (Diab et al, 2011); the impact of applicants seeking to ‘fake’ results of personality tests (Peterson, Griffith & Converse, 2009) and the impact of physical attractiveness (Tews, Stafford & Zhu, 2009). There is some recognition about issues with current approaches; for example, “... the interview is not a strong guide to future performance”, R6.

From the HR system perspective it is important that selection links with other HR focus areas so there is sufficient emphasis on person-team fit and person-organisation fit (less on person-job fit). This links to the idea of selecting on values/attitudes and ‘teaching’ skills. There is a balance between cultural fit and encouraging diversity as expressed by the following: ‘We like people who are different and unique, but we also recognise that having similar and shared values to that of our existing team is critical for smooth operation’. R18

3.5 Transparency in selection

From a positive selection perspective, the focus is on creating a positive, future focused, abundance approach for all involved in the selection process. The aim is for selection to be a real two-way process and includes a comprehensive Realistic Job Preview (RJP) which provide applicants with a detailed and realistic informed impression and can be implemented in a number of ways, including a workplace try out (Breaugh, 2010; Konig et al, 2010). The dilemma for organisations is to balance realism with providing information that job seekers value and thus more likely become applicants (De
Goede, Van Vianen & Klehe, 2013). One organisation uses the selection process to assess whether applicant will be an appropriate technological fit:

*We now only accept electronic applications. Why? Because it’s so much easier to do it that way and these days if you can’t satisfy us that you can even get an electronic application to us you’re just not going to survive in terms of our IT expectations. After shortlisting, we set up a video interviewing arrangement for them, they’d do their recorded sessions and then a panel of us would independently review who we think we should take forward.* R20.

Applicant P-O perceptions influence self-selection decisions (Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001). “...the opportunity to candidly describe a working environment with a balanced view will give the candidate that opportunity to self-select suitability” R13. This is the essence of what RJP provides.

In recent times, there has been discussion that applicants are selecting organisations as much as organisations are selecting applicants. There is an opportunity to "Ask people what they think they can do to help the business." R23. P-O fit is a two-way concept as applicant are assessing the extent to which the organisation fit their cultural and value preferences (De Goede, et al, 2013). Such a two-way process has implications if organisations are effective in obtaining relevant and positive information from and about candidates. This was described in the following manner:

*When you recruiting we are as much being recruited as we are recruiting. It is very much around representing the work environment and ensuring that yes were credible but also we are honest about what the job is and what the work environment is what the work environment isn’t. Because that’s really important to get that fit and part of that is around an understanding about what is motivating the individual to apply for the job and quite often through that process candidates will self-select out on the basis that the role wasn’t what they thought was.* R19

### 3.6 A positive experience for all

Based on the authors’ extensive experience as HR professionals, consultants and lecturing future HR professionals/managers, the vast majority of candidates dislike prevailing selection processes, finding them time-consuming, complex (Georgiou et al, 2012) and stressful (Zysberg, 2012). Student feedback from mock selection exercises as part of an undergraduate HR course, ranks interviews about equal with a visit to the dentist. This is for two key reasons: applicants are placed in an uncomfortable adversarial position (both psychologically and physically) and they have limited control over the structure, content and direction of the process. An example is:
One of my key points is that I never call them interviews because all it does stress people and then you don’t get an inaccurate representation of how the person is. So often I'll just give them a call and say hey how are you going what are you doing on Thursday? Do you want to come in for a cup of coffee? They go ‘oh yeah sure no worries’. You can get a much more accurate representation of how somebody actually is when they're relaxed R18.

Applicant reactions to selection procedures suggest that they know that they have not presented their abilities as truly as possible and that negative experiences have resulted in applicants withdrawing from the selection process (Konig et al, 2010; Parris & Saville, 2011).

Organisations should be interested in individuals’ reactions to selection procedures for several reasons. For example, if job applicants or observers view an organisation’s human resource management practices as unfair or biased, then there is the real possibility that the organisation may not be able to attract some of the most talented people. This may harm the organisation’s competitiveness. Examining how individuals respond to selection procedures under various conditions is therefore both interesting and important for management practice (Seijts & Kyei-Poku, 2010).

Huffcutt (2011) found that the social skills of interviewees (as distinct from the content of answers to questions) and personal characteristics such as attractiveness (Tews, Stafford & Zhu, 2009) can influence ratings. The use of self-promotion and impression management and ingratiation is common in selection interviews and contributes to interview outcomes (Higgins & Judge 2004). Non-verbal behaviour is often commented on by members of interview panels – includes, gaze, smile, hand movement and body orientation (Lievens & Peters, 2008). Carless suggests graduates are ‘well versed in answering standard interview questions’ (2007: 162) as interview training/practice can improve the accuracy of interview ratings (Huffcutt, 2011). As one interviewee stated, “I think anyone can perform well with enough training in a single interview” R16.

4 The implications of a positive approach to selecting applicants

If organisations wish to take a positive approach to selection and adopt the six themes identified in this paper, then it appears that HR professionals will need to fundamentally reflect on their philosophy and approach to selection. This requires questioning the validity of general mental ability and conscientiousness in selection as a recent meta-analysis has cast doubt on conscientiousness as a
predictor of performance for jobs, such as managers, that require high levels of cognitive ability (Shaffer & Postlethwaite, 2013).

Selection practices should be well-integrated with the organisation business strategy and with other HR functions. Positive selection requires increased input and resources prior to positions being advertised but this should lead to selecting people who perform better, require shorter orientation and who have higher retention. HR managers would have to increase their knowledge of the reasons for the choice and the implementation, of specific selection procedures (Carless, Rasiah & Irmer, 2009; Guest, 2007; Konig, et al, 2010; Latham, 2007). In particular, positive selection will require the use of selectors and panels who have been well trained and who have demonstrated capability in making effective evidence-based selection decisions (Lievens & Paepe, 2004; Rousseau, 2006) appropriate to the context of the particular organisation. As one interviewee said… "Be careful about who is doing the selection - get people who have emotional intelligence and do not get caught up in process” R25.

The selection process will require increased focus on P-T and P-O fit and would aim to "Create conditions for people to be their best." R22.

From the interviews, techniques such as using multiple interviews can add value; for example “Our second interview involves discussing the actual position in more depth, to identify and confirm a team/cultural fit...and identify their commitment to the potential role”, R11. P-T fit can be enhanced by involving a wider range of people interacting with applicants; for example inviting applicants: ‘to a ...cocktail function away from work premises with a range of staff ranging from previous graduates to senior (managers). Each gives feedback post-event which is equal weighted”. R5. An alternative approach was explained as:

“In a group interview I bring all of the applicants together with all of my team. We have lunch to work through a lot of the nervousness. We then rotate applicants along actual tasks with designated stakeholders (my team). It went for a day. It was long winded but it was certainly a positive experience for applicants, but also for us. We got to see, and my team also got to choose. People who are working with them need to be involved R16.
5 How can positive selection be sold to HR professionals?

There is considerable literature that describes reasons why there will be challenges in convincing HR practitioners to make changes to selection practices (see Fishwick, 2012). Potential strategies include improving the access for practitioners to contact academics and to academic research (De Cieri, Fenwick & Hutchings, 2005; Guest, 2007; Lievens & Paepe, 2004; Rynes, Colbert & Brown, 2002) and to encourage increased use of integrated processes which includes reflecting on decision making styles (Guest, 2007; Highhouse, 2008; Langhammer, Bernard-Oettel & Hellgren, 2012). However, despite the research supporting the use of greater ‘rigour and science’ in selection, there is evidence that contextual knowledge of the organisation and understanding of the local labour market can produce positive outcomes using more informal selection methods (Lockyer & Scholarios, 2004).

The training and attitudes to selection techniques of those who conduct selection interviews provide insight into the choices made by organisations in designing their selection processes (Highhouse, 2008; Rynes, Barber & Varma, 2000. There is some evidence of organisations limiting training in selection “…there is no specific training for those involved in …selection interviews” R6. Quality assurance mechanisms are required to assess that selection techniques are effectively implemented (Carless et al, 2009). These points reinforce the importance of the relationship between the HR function and line managers (Brandl, Madsen & Madsen, 2009; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) who typically participate in selection processes. Increasing the PsyCap of HR specialists could encourage them to re-consider existing selection practices, as access to contemporary research, in accessible language, and opportunities for appropriate training could increase their self-efficacy (Langhammer et al, 2012). Effective positive selection training and opportunities to experience skilled selectors in action can contribute to the process being positive for all involved. Such training and experience contributes to all involved being able to fully contribute as explained by one interviewee:

*In contributing to a panel you've got the freedom within that organisation’s culture to make a contribution: to speak your mind and to be part of the outcome of selection. Training is really important and that culture goes a long way for individuals to feel comfortable and to make their contribution* R19.
6. Implications, Limitations and Conclusions

The implication for academics is to more effectively integrate existing selection research with relevant aspects of positive psychology to produce more coherent rigorous frameworks that capture the best of people rather than not rejecting according to perceived worst attributes. To produce valid and evidence based research would require longitudinal studies that trace the development of positive selection from design to process and to effectiveness of outcomes.

The implications for HR practitioners are to reflect on how a positive approach could add value to their organisation; to acquire sufficient capability in the design and implementation of positive selection and, most critically to be able to develop a persuasive business case to convince senior members of their organisation of the merit in adopting positive selection.

The limitations of this paper are that that it was primarily conceptual and used qualitative research to illustrate themes identified. It did not develop formal research questions to be answered. The interviewees were HR practitioners from one Australian state supplemented by a small number of respondents with a positive psychology approach.

The major conclusions are that as organisations and jobs are becoming increasing complex and knowledge intensive; as the nature of employee relationships and their expectations change and as selection becomes increasing a genuine two-way process, it is timely to reflect on the appropriateness and effectiveness of prevailing selection practices. A positive approach utilising the concepts of a ‘dynamic view of merit’ and critical success factors (CSFs) has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of selection decisions and make the process more positive for all concerned. However, given the existing research-practice gap, there are significant challenges for HR professionals in convincing organisations to adopt a positive approach. Hopefully, this paper can contribute towards this goal.
References


Appendices

Figure 1: Correct & incorrect selection decisions

(Nankervis, Compton, Baird & Coffey, 2011: 270). Used with permission
Figure 2: Dynamic view of merit
Figure 3: Assessment of critical success factors

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Abstract

This paper discusses applying positive organisational behaviour to selection of managerial level positions using the themes of being dynamic, outcomes focussed, contextual, holistic, transparent, and that selection be a positive experience for applicants and recruiters. The paper introduces the concepts of a dynamic view of merit and critical success factors in supporting a positive process. Illustrative data from interviews with HR managers where responses pointed at a positive approach have been used. Challenges for HR managers in obtaining support to develop and implement positive approach to selection are highlighted.

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1. Introduction

The aims of this paper are to discuss a positive approach to selection as an opportunity for a holistic, outcomes based and forward focussed approach (in contrast with prevailing selection approaches); to outline a positive selection approach using a thematic approach; and, discuss how HR professionals can be influenced given the well-discussed gap between research and practice in selection. It is primarily a conceptual paper that aims to commence a dialogue on positive selection.

Selection is the most important of the human resource management functions as it determines those people who are going to contribute to the organisation achieving outcomes (Boxall & Purcell, 2011; Rousseau, 2006). This paper will critically examine the prevailing approach to employee selection for Australian managers (Di Milia, 2004). Such people perform jobs that require complex decision making, leadership and influencing in contexts of resource pressures and changing circumstances. The prevailing focus on selection processes appears to be one of ‘minimising’ the likelihood of selecting a ‘poor performer’ whilst using a static and negative approach. Research supports the contention that negative information is given much more weight than positive information (Kahneman 2011). As selection decisions involve progressively moving from many applicants to those offered employment, the prevailing approach gives less weight to positive than to negative information.

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As the purpose of this paper is to examine the selection process from a positive perspective, and is structured in a thematic manner, a qualitative approach is appropriate to discuss ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions of positive selection. Transcripts of semi-structured interviews about current HR practices with HR managers/specialists from one Australian state were analysed to identify aspects consistent
with the positive selection highlighted in the introduction (Eisenhardt, 1989; Konig et al, 2010; Teo et al, 2008). No questions were designed with a specific positive psychology focus.

Twenty-six interviews were analysed from three sets of interviews: HR professionals with a primary responsibility for selection, generalist HR managers and key people from organisations who sought to adopt a positive psychology approach in their organisation. A convenience sampling technique was used based on personal contact and to achieve a range of organisations from different sectors that have a reputation for using good people management practices (Takeuchi, Chen & Lepak, 2009).

The transcripts were analysed and coded into the key themes that reflect a positive approach to selection. Given the qualitative nature, the analysis focussed on illustration and relevance rather than frequencies (Becker & Geer, 1982). The interviewees are identified by number as follows:

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The current understanding of merit is ‘static’ in neither recognising changing needs of an organisation nor the ability to develop as a member of staff. That is, an applicant is to be measured on a set of existing criteria and how they relate to an existing position. With a dynamic and strategic approach to selection these static constructs of existing qualities for a particular position are challenged.

A positive approach to selection aims to select people who will add the most value to the organisation. It is therefore focussed on future performance rather than current capability. Whilst there has been some movement towards selecting the ‘right’ person for the organisation rather than the ‘best’ person for the job, the focus in selection has been on who is currently the most meritorious candidate. As assessing an applicant’s potential requires a different approach to designing and measuring criteria, a more dynamic view of the merit principle is required. We have called this approach ‘a dynamic view of merit’. This is consistent with strategic selection that links selection activities with the organisation’s future strategic objectives and workplace culture. The dynamic view of merit values future potential above past and current performance. The reason for this refocus is that positions are typically dynamic, changing in response to the particular demands of an organisation at any given time. So the questions in assessing applicants are: “…will they be right for the role; will they be right for the team; will they be right for the organisation. Not only today, but tomorrow and also in six and 12 months, or two years’ time?” R19.

In typical selection processes, merit is assessed on ‘…abilities, qualifications, experience, standard of work performance and personal qualities relevant to job performance’ (O’Leary et al, 2002, p2). This is a static approach that does not fully assess the changing nature of the organisation or the potential of the applicants. It also favours those applicants already performing in a particular capacity. The dynamic view of merit not only benefits the future of the organisation but also potentially addresses issues of equity and access. The dynamic view of merit can be illustrated diagrammatically.

(Insert Figure 2 about here)

The vertical axis is capacity and the horizontal axis is time. C is the required performance standard to begin the position and A and B are two applicants. If a person is to be employed for a short period of time then A would be the most meritorious as they have existing skills relevant to the organisational
demands, but if the employee is expected to remain for some time, then the future capacity of applicant B is greater. In changing organisations, the competency expectation levels over time increase and at some time in the future person A may not only be a lesser performer than B but also below the organisation’s performance requirements.

3.2 An outcomes focus
The concept of merit selection requires the use of an appropriate and defendable set of criteria against which to select candidates. Typically selection criteria are written around knowledge, skills and attributes (KSAs) and assessed individually. However, in undertaking job roles, people use a range of KSAs to produce results. In the context of a positive approach to selection, we pose the question that ‘if the selection outcome was successful, what would the employee have achieved over a reasonable designated period’? This period may be different for different types of positions and different organisations. This approach defines those outcomes as critical success factors (CSF’s). Assessing CSFs requires a broader approach that differs from a focus on narrowly defined knowledge and skills (Capelli, 2012). Two examples of this approach in practice are: ‘My tendency as an HR professional is to go with someone who shows potential rather than someone who’s kind of been plateauing ...’ R17, and ‘I've had a focus in creating selection criteria which much more focuses on the subjective factors and those people factors ... getting away from that very rigid (so called) objective type criteria that a lot of firms work through” R16.

From an evidenced based perspective, it is also important to assess each CSF using at least two techniques. This avoids the potential problem of ‘selecting out’ an applicant based on information from a single source that may not be accurate or appropriate in the context of the specific position. A template for this approach is shown as Figure 3.

(Insert figure 3 about here).

3.3 Contextual factors (integrating person-team fit and person-organisation fit)

There has been an increased emphasis on P-O fit which focuses on broader value-based characteristics such as: adaptability, conscientiousness, team-orientation and responsibility, rather than on job
specific capabilities (O’Leary et al, 2002; Scroggins, Thomas & Morris, 2008). There is a view that organisations should … “Be focused on values from the beginning” R26.

Actual fit is assessed by comparing independent measures of workers’ values and their perception of the organization’s values, whereas perceived fit is conceptualized as an individual’s overall judgement about the extent to which they perceive a fit with the organization. P–O fit is assumed to have important implications for employees’ well-being and various organizational outcomes, as it affects central attitudes and behaviour of people in the workplace (van Vuuren et al, 2007). There is also an increased focus on person-team (P-T) fit (Burch & Anderson, 2004). A relevant example of fit in practice is,

> The first port of call is to make sure they fit within that team. Second port of call is make sure your team is aligned with the organisation because if you just create your team and its misaligned with the organisation that is going to be misaligned for forever and that person will never be aligned to the organisation because it started off unaligned’. R16

One key reason for the focus on P-T and P-O fit is that applicants who are high on these factors will be able more quickly adapt and perform in their new role; for example:

> Fit into an organisation to me is paramount. Core competencies are very important. However we can always up skill, and we can if with got the right organisational fit. If someone can almost hit the ground running, we can teach them and take them through everything else that we need. R14

A reason for a focus on these personal, values based attributes is that these are seen as difficult to change whilst skills and knowledge can be developed on the job (Bartram, 2004). Chew & Chan (2008) found that organisational commitment of incumbents and intention to stay was significantly positively affected by P-O fit. A person’s set of values is an element of fit and research on selecting for values fit (compatibility between personal and organisational values) found that values fit indicates longer length of service (retention) and higher displays of Organisational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB) (Rynes, Colbert & Brown, 2002). For example some firms seek:

> …a demonstrated ability to learn and a fundamental understanding from which to build on its really fit with the business and fleshing out that ability to learn and continuing to learn and shape their knowledge with the organisation that is something that is going to give long-term benefit both the applicant and the organisation. R13
3.4 A holistic approach

A holistic approach to recruitment has 3 dimensions, those of the individual, the HR system and the organisation. Individuals bring their own unique balance of strengths to their jobs and actively craft their roles to bring about increased engagement, job satisfaction and workplace fit (Berg, Dutton & Wrzeniewski 2008). In assessing an applicant against the CSFs, it is important to look at their whole range of capabilities, potential and how they can craft a role, not just their paid work history. An appropriate range of selections techniques are required to enable a considered judgement of applicants against the CSFs. This can reduce the domination of weight given to interview performance (Diab et al, 2011); the impact of applicants seeking to ‘fake’ results of personality tests (Peterson, Griffith & Converse, 2009) and the impact of physical attractiveness (Tews, Stafford & Zhu, 2009). There is some recognition about issues with current approaches; for example, “... the interview is not a strong guide to future performance” R6.

From the HR system perspective it is important that selection links with other HR focus areas so there is sufficient emphasis on person-team fit and person-organisation fit (less on person-job fit). This links to the idea of selecting on values/attitudes and ‘teaching’ skills. There is a balance between cultural fit and encouraging diversity as expressed by the following: “We like people who are different and unique, but we also recognise that having similar and shared values to that of our existing team is critical for smooth operation” R18.

3.5 Transparency in selection

From a positive selection perspective, the focus is on creating a positive, future focused, abundance approach for all involved in the selection process. The aim is for selection to be a real two-way process and includes a comprehensive Realistic Job Preview (RJP) which provide applicants with a detailed and realistic informed impression and can be implemented in a number of ways, including a workplace try out (Breaugh, 2010; Konig et al, 2010). The dilemma for organisations is to balance realism with providing information that job seekers value and thus more likely become applicants (De
Goede, Van Vianen & Klehe, 2013). One organisation uses the selection process to assess whether applicant will be an appropriate technological fit:

*We now only accept electronic applications. Why? Because it’s so much easier to do it that way and these days if you can’t satisfy us that you can even get an electronic application to us you’re just not going to survive in terms of our IT expectations. After shortlisting, we set up a video interviewing arrangement for them, they’d do their recorded sessions and then a panel of us would independently review who we think we should take forward.* R20

Applicant P-O perceptions influence self-selection decisions (Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001). “…the opportunity to candidly describe a working environment with a balanced view will give the candidate that opportunity to self-select suitability” R13. This is the essence of what a RJP provides.

In recent times, there has been discussion that applicants are selecting organisations as much as organisations are selecting applicants. There is an opportunity to "Ask people what they think they can do to help the business." R23. P-O fit is a two-way concept as applicant are assessing the extent to which the organisation fit their cultural and value preferences (De Goede, et al, 2013). Such a two-way process has implications if organisations are effective in obtaining relevant and positive information from and about candidates. This was described in the following manner:

*When you recruiting we are as much being recruited as we are recruiting. It is very much around representing the work environment and ensuring that yes were credible but also we are honest about what the job is and what the work environment is what the work environment isn't. Because that's really important to get that fit and part of that is around an understanding about what is motivating the individual to apply for the job and quite often through that process candidates will self-select out on the basis that the role wasn't what they thought was.* R19

### 3.6 A positive experience for all

Based on the authors’ extensive experience as HR professionals, consultants and lecturing future HR professionals/managers, the vast majority of candidates dislike prevailing selection processes, finding them time-consuming, complex (Georgiou et al, 2012) and stressful (Zysberg, 2012). Student feedback from mock selection exercises as part of an undergraduate HR course, ranks interviews about equal with a visit to the dentist. This is for two key reasons: applicants are placed in an uncomfortable adversarial position (both psychologically and physically) and they have limited
control over the structure, content and direction of the process. An example from an organisation in
the arts industry is:

One of my key points is that I never call them interviews because all it does stress people and
then you don’t get an inaccurate representation of how the person is. So often I'll just give
them a call and say hey how are you going what are you doing on Thursday? Do you want to
come in for a cup of coffee? They go ‘oh yeah sure no worries’. You can get a much more
accurate representation of how somebody actually is when they’re relaxed. R18

Applicant reactions to selection procedures suggest that they know that they have not presented their
abilities as truly as possible and that negative experiences have resulted in applicants withdrawing
from the selection process (Konig et al, 2010; Parris & Saville, 2011).

Organisations should be interested in individuals’ reactions to selection procedures for several
reasons. For example, if job applicants or observers view an organisation’s human resource
management practices as unfair or biased, then there is the real possibility that the organisation may
not be able to attract some of the most talented people. This may harm the organisation’s
competitiveness. Examining how individuals respond to selection procedures under various conditions
is therefore both interesting and important for management practice (Seijts & Kyei-Poku, 2010).

Huffcutt (2011) found that the social skills of interviewees (as distinct from the content of answers to
questions) and personal characteristics such as attractiveness (Tews, Stafford & Zhu, 2009) can
influence ratings. The use of self-promotion and impression management and ingratiation is common
in selection interviews and contributes to interview outcomes (Higgins & Judge 2004). Non-verbal
behaviour is often commented on by members of interview panels – includes, gaze, smile, hand
movement and body orientation (Lievens & Peters, 2008). Carless suggests graduates are ‘well versed
in answering standard interview questions’ (2007: 162) as interview training/practice can improve the
accuracy of interview ratings (Huffcutt, 2011). As one interviewee stated, “I think anyone can
perform well with enough training in a single interview” R16.

4 Discussion of the implications of a positive approach to selecting applicants

If organisations wish to take a positive approach to selection and adopt the six themes identified in
this paper, then it appears that HR professionals will need to fundamentally reflect on their philosophy
and approach to selection. This requires questioning the validity of general mental ability and conscientiousness in selection as a recent meta-analysis has cast doubt on conscientiousness as a predictor of performance for jobs, such as managers, that require high levels of cognitive ability (Shaffer & Postlethwaite, 2013).

Selection practices should be well-integrated with the organisation business strategy and with other HR functions. Positive selection requires increased input and resources prior to positions being advertised but this should lead to selecting people who perform better, require shorter orientation and who have higher retention. HR managers would have to increase their knowledge of the reasons for the choice and the implementation, of specific selection procedures (Carless, Rasiah & Irmer, 2009; Guest, 2007; Konig, et al, 2010; Latham, 2007). In particular, positive selection will require the use of selectors and panels who have been well trained and who have demonstrated capability in making effective evidence-based selection decisions (Lievens & Paepe, 2004; Rousseau, 2006) appropriate to the context of the particular organisation. As one interviewee said... "Be careful about who is doing the selection - get people who have emotional intelligence and do not get caught up in process” R25.

The selection process will require increased focus on P-T and P-O fit and would aim to "Create conditions for people to be their best“ R22.

From the interviews, techniques such as using multiple interviews can add value; for example “Our second interview involves discussing the actual position in more depth, to identify and confirm a team/cultural fit...and identify their commitment to the potential role” R11. P-T fit can be enhanced by involving a wider range of people interacting with applicants; for example inviting applicants: “to a ...cocktail function away from work premises with a range of staff ranging from previous graduates to senior (managers). Each gives feedback post-event which is equal weighted” R5. An alternative approach was explained as:

*In a group interview I bring all of the applicants together with all of my team. We have lunch to work through a lot of the nervousness. We then rotate applicants along actual tasks with designated stakeholders (my team). It went for a day. It was long winded but it was certainly a positive experience for applicants, but also for us. We got to see, and my team also got to choose. People who are working with them need to be involved R16.*
5 How can positive selection be sold to HR professionals?

There is considerable literature that describes reasons why there will be challenges in convincing HR practitioners to make changes to selection practices (see Fishwick, 2012). Potential strategies include improving the access for practitioners to contact academics and to academic research (De Cieri, Fenwick & Hutchings, 2005; Guest, 2007; Lievens & Paepe, 2004; Rynes, Colbert & Brown, 2002) and to encourage increased use of integrated processes which includes reflecting on decision making styles (Guest, 2007; Highhouse, 2008; Langhammer, Bernard-Oettel & Hellgren, 2012). However, despite the research supporting the use of greater ‘rigour and science’ in selection, there is evidence that contextual knowledge of the organisation and understanding of the local labour market can produce positive outcomes using more informal selection methods (Lockyer & Scholarios, 2004).

The training and attitudes to selection techniques of those who conduct selection interviews provide insight into the choices made by organisations in designing their selection processes (Highhouse, 2008; Rynes, Barber & Varma, 2000. There is some evidence of organisations limiting training in selection “...there is no specific training for those involved in ...selection interviews” R6. Quality assurance mechanisms are required to assess that selection techniques are effectively implemented (Carless et al, 2009). These points reinforce the importance of the relationship between the HR function and line managers (Brandl, Madsen & Madsen, 2009; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) who typically participate in selection processes. Increasing the PsyCap of HR specialists could encourage them to re-consider existing selection practices, as access to contemporary research, in accessible language, and opportunities for appropriate training could increase their self-efficacy (Langhammer et al, 2012). Effective positive selection training and opportunities to experience skilled selectors in action can contribute to the process being positive for all involved. Such training and experience contributes to all involved being able to fully contribute as explained by one interviewee:

*In contributing to a panel you've got the freedom within that organisation’s culture to make a contribution: to speak your mind and to be part of the outcome of selection. Training is really important and that culture goes a long way for individuals to feel comfortable and to make their contribution.* R19
6. Implications, Limitations and Conclusions

The implication for academics is to more effectively integrate existing selection research with relevant aspects of positive psychology to produce more coherent rigorous frameworks that capture the best of people rather than not rejecting according to perceived worst attributes. To produce valid and evidence based research would require longitudinal studies that trace the development of positive selection from design to process and to effectiveness of outcomes.

The implications for HR practitioners are to reflect on how a positive approach could add value to their organisation; to acquire sufficient capability in the design and implementation of positive selection and, most critically to be able to develop a persuasive business case to convince senior members of their organisation of the merit in adopting positive selection.

The limitations of this paper are that that it was primarily conceptual and used qualitative research to illustrate themes identified. It did not develop formal research questions to be answered. The interviewees were HR practitioners from one Australian state supplemented by a small number of respondents who have sought to adopt a positive psychology approach in their organisation.

The major conclusions are that as organisations and jobs are becoming increasing complex and knowledge intensive; as the nature of employee relationships and their expectations change and as selection becomes increasing a genuine two-way process, it is timely to reflect on the appropriateness and effectiveness of prevailing selection practices. A positive approach utilising the concepts of a ‘dynamic view of merit’ and critical success factors (CSFs) has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of selection decisions and make the process more positive for all concerned. However, given the existing research-practice gap, there are significant challenges for HR professionals in convincing organisations to adopt a positive approach. Hopefully, this paper can contribute towards this goal.
References


Appendices

Figure 1: Correct & incorrect selection decisions

(Nankervis, Compton, Baird & Coffey, 2011: 270). Used with permission
Figure 2: Dynamic view of merit

[Graph showing capacity over time with points A, B, and C]
Figure 3: Assessment of critical success factors

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