



## ABOUT TWO EXPLANATIONS OF EFFECTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ENGAGEMENT OF A COMPANY ON ITS ATTRACTIVENESS IN AN E-RECRUITMENT SITUATION

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**Abstract.** E-recruitment is the fastest growing group of methods of recruitment. Its application encounters less obstacles even in countries that are not a leaders in new technologies, as will be shown on data from Poland. The article presents a typology of 4 levels of e-recruitment methods and analyses two theories that are used to explain the effects of a potential employer's image-creating activities, eg. signal theory and cultural value fit. Data from a questionnaire was used to verify the effects of informing about how the organization engages in environmental issues on its attractiveness in the e-recruitment situation. It was found that positive information concerning pro-environmental activities affects candidates according to the cultural fit model, while negative information - according to the signal theory model. It is therefore assumed that each of these theories explains the influence of different groups of information in the recruitment situation.

**Keywords:** e-recruitment, employer branding, fit theory, signal theory, CSR.

**JEL classification:** M12, M51, M31, J24, J23.

### 1. Introduction

Online recruitment constitutes the fastest growing area in contemporary recruitment practices (Listwan 2010). Its increasingly wide use is meeting with ever fewer barriers related to Internet access among the various groups of potential employees and employers.

However, the variability of methods used in online recruitment complicates its understanding by the sciences and the creation of management recommendations for its successful application. This hampers its spread, and lack of competence on the side of employers is mentioned as one of the barriers to its becoming universal.

The aim of this article is to analyse the different approaches of two main theories used to explain how branding information affects the way candidates view a company's attractiveness, and to show that these theories supplement each other. Using the example of selected information in the area of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and the data from questionnaire research, the text will show that each of these theories better explains the effect of information of different types, and thus that they are complementary and not rival elucidations of the branding value of various kinds of information provided during the recruitment process.

The article is organized as follows: the first part summarizes general knowledge about e-recruitment. I suggest that the reader who is interested in a broader understanding of the issues should become acquainted with my other works on the subject (Woźniak 2013, 2014ab). The second part is devoted to a brief explanation of the two theories' application to recruitment. Both theories refer to a broader field of phenomena, and thus their use to clarify the recruitment situation is worthy of closer analysis. The next part describes the premises of the study conducted to verify the applicability of these theories to the recruitment situation. The research methodology and hypotheses are presented in part five. The final part of the text contains the results and conclusions.

### 2. On-line recruitment – its definition and scope

E-recruitment is the fastest growing of recruitment methods (Listwan 2010). E-recruitment's scope is variously assessed, depending on the sector of the economy, country, post for which candidates are e-recruited, or kind of organization. It is common in the US (Stone *et al.* 2013; Selden, Orenstein 2011) and Western Europe (Zajac 2012). In Poland, the main barrier to making full use of its possibilities is not so much access to the Internet (there is universal access to the Internet in the country among

persons with secondary education, while Internet exclusion in the whole population under 60 years of age does not exceed 30% – Woźniak 2014b), but employers' lack of competence (Woźniak 2013; 2014b).

Obstacles to its application are becoming fewer, even in countries that are not leaders in new technologies, as is illustrated by data from Poland (Woźniak 2013; 2014ab). However, the knowledge that companies have of factors that affect whether they are perceived as an attractive place of work is still poor, which is proven by data showing that a large percentage of candidates negatively evaluate information on company websites.

These facts are important because the basic tool for Internet recruitment is the company website, to which potential candidates are directed by various means – from advertisements on job portals, through social networking services, to crowdsourcing). High capacity Internet connections have made it possible for companies to place more information on their websites using a rich array of channels – films, testimonials, blogs or games. As classic recruitment has proved, the attractiveness of job offers for candidates is increased if there is more information, more highly individualized and communicated with the use of richer means (Yüce, Highhouse 1998). Analogous conclusions for Internet recruitment lack proof – it is generally accepted that “more means better” (Allen *et al.* 2007), but research on coupling relevant forms with specific content is rudimentary.

Successive attempts to apply methods developed by the marketing function to the personnel function have yielded slightly different recommendations concerning what information about an enterprise's characteristics or activities has a positive effect on its image during the recruitment process. Personnel marketing emphasizes the need to create internal structures that will create an environment conducive to developing competencies, induce participation in management, and motivate (Baruk 2006). Such an environment in effect increases employee satisfaction and this – indirectly – creates an attractive image for the organization, internally and externally. In this approach, satisfied employees are to be the main motor of a positive image, while additional recommendations concerning clarity of recruitment procedures are to assist in building an image of the company as a desirable place of work.

The introduction of brand theory into HR has significantly modified this approach (Woźniak 2013). Following the example of how product brands affect clients interested in buying consumer goods (producer brand), a set of recommendations

were developed for creating company image (employer brand).

Contrary to traditional personnel marketing, managing employer brands signifies creating value for potential employees using the fact that a brand embodies value over and above functional values and that the consumer brand may partly affect the value of the employer brand (Keller 2003; Cable, Turban 2003; Gomez, Neves 2010; Woźniak 2013). As not only instrumental, but also symbolic factors are of significance for the candidate “buying” a place of work, companies were instructed to construct their marketing image during recruitment in the terms of a unique selling proposition, using both kinds of information. Companies are recommended to choose an image (even – to create it for the purposes of recruitment), and to communicate the instrumental and symbolic advantages for potential candidates of work for the company.

Research into e-recruitment has shown that decisions of potential employees are affected not only by the package of tangible, direct benefits, which they will receive as employees (instrumental factors such as salary, localization, kinds of tasks, or development and promotion opportunities). Also significant are the less measurable symbolic advantages (such as the values the company espouses – environmental, social consciousness, or care for the marginalized groups in the global economy). Similar research is carried out on this topic as into the effect of producer brands, despite the strong suggestion that there is no scientific backing for the adequacy of this analogy (Maroko, Ucles 2008).

The results of research into the effect of instrumental and symbolic factors for different brands are consistent, showing the influence of both these groups of factors to be similar in intensity. Lievens, who researched the brand of the Belgian army as employer, found that instrumental factors account for 40% of the differentiation in candidates' opinions as to the army's attractiveness, while symbolic factors accounted for about 30% (Lievens 2007). What more, instrumental factors turned out to be the most important at the stage when decisions to apply for work were being made (in contrast to the opinions of potential candidates or those already employed), while symbolic factors explained attractiveness with similar strength in all of the three groups studied (Lievens 2007). In a similar study carried out on a sample of bank employees and students, the influence of both groups of factors was also similar in strength (accounting for ca. 16% of differentiation of attractiveness in both cases; Lievens, Highhouse 2003), although different symbolic factors were important. In contrast with the army, the most im-

portant non-instrumental factor for the bank's attractiveness in its employer role was its image as an innovative and competent enterprise (Lievens, Highhouse 2003).

However, rules concerning both content as form of the communication a company engages in to increase its attractiveness as an employer during internet recruitment are still unclear. They are based on deduction by analogy from brand marketing theory, although for some time it has been known that completely different factors steer the decisions of "consumers" in the case of workplace choice, as compared with those operating while buying goods, even exclusive ones (Maroko, Ucles 2008).

The "embryonic state of research on how companies create their brand as employers" (Maroko, Ucles 2008) means that prescriptions for choosing effective sets of factors for creating the attractiveness of a given company not only lack clear standards of practice, but also theoretical grounding. Theory is grounded in two competing theories – cultural fit and signal theory – and their interrelationships in the field of e-recruitment are only just beginning to be explained.

### 3. Two theories explaining the attractiveness of an organization to candidates during online recruitment

Research has only recently begun into the attractiveness of company branding information available to a candidate during online recruitment. The internet lowers the cost of obtaining information and thus makes it possible for candidates to acquire a broader range of information about a firm than is presented by its intentional branding activities.

A series of findings concerning appraisals of the attractiveness of e-recruitment offers has shown that an appraisal is impacted by the formal properties of the advertisement itself (Allen *et al.* 2007) as well as by the content contained on the website.

In both these areas, research basically occurs in two theoretical paradigms (Braddy *et al.* 2009; PfiEFFELMANN *et al.* 2010) describing the mechanisms of candidates' reactions to information acquired online: one refers to the model of intentional rational action, and specifically to Vroom's motivational theory (Lin 2010), and the second to Simon's theory of bounded rationality (Woźniak 2013).

In this first area, the most important theory explaining the attractiveness of an organization is the theory of personality fit, or specifically Ben Schneider's Attraction-Selection-Attrition theory of 1980. According to this theory, a candidate's fit with the organization's culture will increase the

attractiveness of the organization in his eyes, as well as his chance of doing well while working for it (Schneider *et al.* 1998). This agrees with the phenomenon, which has been studied in management for 100 years and constitutes "one of the most valuable motifs in psychological theorizing" (Kristof-Brown *et al.* 2005: 281), of suitability in the interaction of an individual with his environment. It has been empirically confirmed multiple times that persons who fit well with the value system of the organization for which they work have higher indicators of the variables (called affective variables) describing their employee morale: that is, a higher level of work satisfaction, company engagement, and even civic behaviour (i.e., behavioural variables) (Arthur *et al.* 2006).

It should be emphasized that the theory of organizational fit is increasingly often being treated as the theory that should constitute the basis for employee selection (Arthur *et al.* 2006), in spite of the "lack of empirical evidence [higher productivity of individuals fitting the organization] to support it" (*ibid.*). In attempting to define the concept of fit precisely, a series of differentiations and partial definitions has been introduced to describe the suitability of a person for his or her vocation, job, organization, group, and superior (Kristof-Brown *et al.* 2005; Edwards, Billsberry 2010), as well as to distinguish objective, perceived, or subjective fit in each of these areas.

In studying candidates it has been demonstrated that they are capable of analysing information about an organization's culture presented online (Braddy *et al.* 2006). The fit theory has proved its usefulness for most cases of explanation the attractiveness of an employer branding information. However, the effect of some type of information has turned out to be different than expected by the theory of organizational fit. It was found that only for women did a perceived fit with the organization's culture correlate with a perception of the organization as attractive. No such dependence was discovered among men (PfiEFFELMANN *et al.* 2010).

The second theory referred to in explanations of the effect of branding information during online recruitment is signalling theory. This theory presupposes that when a social situation requires parties to act in conditions of limited access to information, part of their activities do not have the aim of explicit communicating but rather of signalling certain information that is difficult for the other party to verify directly.

Research in this direction has been conducted within the framework of broader economics research accenting the asymmetry of information between parties operating in the market. The research points to two main areas in which an

asymmetry of information appears: information about quality and about intention. Both types of information are easy to find in a recruitment situation. The future employer may, before employing a person, assess the quality of a given candidate with a fair degree of uncertainty, but the candidate may also wonder what working for a given firm will entail beyond what is revealed and described in the job contract. Neither side knows the intentions of the other - the employer does not know whether the candidate truly wants to devote the coming years to the job (as a key career step), while the candidate does not know what the employer has in store for him (both in terms of contract length and career development, as well as in terms of specific arrangements for harmonizing work and private life).

A. Michael Spence's signalling theory, which is the basis for analysing these issues, appeared in 1973. The theory makes it possible to explain in detail why students are prepared to pay many times higher tuition at famous schools even though the level of instruction in various educational institutions does not vary much. The theory explains that since, from the employer's perspective, a definitive appraisal of a job candidate's value can not be done *ex ante* (before the candidate has worked for the employer for a significant time), the candidate provides the employer with signals by which he tries to convince the latter of his high value. A high investment in a degree from an expensive school constitutes such a signal as it directly indicates the importance the candidate attaches to education and thus indirectly indicates the high value of his work (not on account of his great knowledge, but on account of his concern and readiness to meet high requirements, that is, in particular, paying the tuition of such a school). In Spence's opinion - in contrast to Becker's theory of social capital - the role of expensive education is not to transmit knowledge but to send signals (communication lowering the risk arising from an asymmetry of information) (Spence 2002). The definitional 'signalling' in this theory means the selection by the party sending the signal of an attribute that is set and easy to verify and observe (for instance, a degree from an expensive school) as an instrument of transmitting to the recipient information about certain intangible traits that are hard to verify and can be assessed only with a high degree of uncertainty. For the recipient of the signal, the conclusions reached on the basis of the information transmitted by the signal must be to a large degree advantageous - the signalling has a strategic effect. In the absence of a signal, the recipient would have difficulties in undertaking one

of the actions open to him, as the level of uncertainty as to the consequences would be significant.

The claim that thanks to the sending of a specific signal the sender significantly decreases the uncertainty of the recipient as to the consequences of one of the actions the recipient might take - and that this action is beneficial to the sender - is key to the signalling theory. In order for this claim to be true, it is essential to accept the premise about the high cost the sender must incur in order to be able to send the signal. Otherwise, the result would be the mass sending of false signals, and thus any conclusions based on these signals would be delusive. For this reason, Spence's theory is sometimes called "the theory of sending expensive signals" (Connelly *et al.* 2011). An additional premise, without which Spence's theory about the effectiveness of signalling as a means of increasing the remuneration received from an employer cannot be understood, is the lower cost of the signal that senders who are capable of high-quality work incur.

#### 4. Research premises and hypotheses

The aim of this research is to show how information affects the growth of attractiveness of an organization's job openings. Different kinds of information - related or unrelated to candidates' values - will be analysed. Value fit is a frequent explanation of why a sensible strategy for creating employer image is to present the company as being socially involved. The study will show that cultural fit and signalling theories offer two approaches which supplement each other, depending on whether the information presented is positive or negative.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is an umbrella concept which links under one term several distinct kinds of involvement in social issues, where the beneficiaries are for example one's own employees, local communities, the environment, disadvantaged groups, etc. By various means researchers have attempted to confirm that serious involvement in CSR activities on the part of an enterprise, coupled with a demonstration of this involvement successfully create financial or stock-exchange value for shareholders (Godfrey *et al.* 2009; cf. review of research in Woźniak 2012). Research has shown that CSR factors differ in their impact (Behrend *et al.* 2009). In particular, engagement in ecological issues has a different effect than other factors. The source of the difference lies in such engagement being less widespread and in the force of ecological values in comparison with a perceived potential benefit.

Assuming adequate indications of a cultural fit between a candidate and a firm otherwise, a firm's self-presentation as pro-ecological should increase its attractiveness for candidates declaring themselves to hold ecological values, both when the claim to having such values is only general, and - more strongly - for persons who declare their actual engagement in pro-ecological activities.

H1. Firms that provide information about their pro-ecological activities will be more attractive to candidates declaring an attachment to pro-ecological values than to candidates who do not have pro-ecological values.

This effect should be independent of the nature of the information presented; that is, presenting information about a firm's pro-ecological activities should increase a firm's attractiveness and presenting information about its anti-ecological activities should decrease its attractiveness among the group of persons who are sensitive - on account of the values they possess - to this type of information.

On the other hand, a difference should be expected in the effects of providing examples of a firm's specific pro-ecological activities and providing information that only states that the firm acts in accordance with general 'ecological principles'. This difference should be stronger among persons having a lower level of trust in capitalism (see below).

H2. Examples of specific pro-ecological activities will increase a firm's attractiveness more than does information about a firm's general endorsement of pro-ecological principles, particularly among persons who are pro-ecologically engaged.

From the perspective of signalling theory, a positive and negative situation should be interpreted differently. Positive information should always have a positive impact on an organization's attractiveness, although it will probably have the strongest effect among persons having a similar sphere of engagement (because it will be considered more significant), but negative information should be interpreted more or less strongly by all candidates, regardless of the values they hold, as a signal of the unattractiveness of the job offer. Thus, on the basis of signalling theory, the following hypothesis may be formulated:

H3. Information proving that a firm has engaged in harmful activities for the natural environment should decrease the desire of job-seekers to apply to a given firm, independently of a candidate's own declared pro-ecological engagement.

In accordance with signalling theory, the strength of this connection should be modified not by the candidate's values (or at least, the influence of values should be small), but by confidence in

the reliability of the information presented by a firm. Those candidates who more strongly perceive a firm's communications in categories of manipulating signals should be more sensitive to information that reflects negatively on a firm than candidates who treat such communications as intentional and straightforward. Assuming that a good operationalization of the lack of confidence in a company, and what follows - treating communications from it as manipulation - is the respondent's conviction that 'all firms are interested in is their own profit' (which can be interpreted as an anti-capitalist attitude), the following hypothesis can be formed:

H4. Information showing that a firm has acted to the detriment of the natural environment (or has engaged in other activities generally considered reprehensible) more strongly decreases the desire to apply to the firm among candidates who do not have trust in a good will of companies ('anti-capitalists') than among the remainder.

## 5. Methodology and research proceedings

The research described below was based on the assumption that in analyzing information on the internet a candidate presupposes that a company, consciously if not entirely perfectly, shapes its own image, and thus that information about this company and the properties of the job offer appearing on the internet (in particular on the company's website) are of variable reliability.

The candidate's general attitude toward capitalism shapes (informs) his evaluation: the more the candidate considers that a firm is striving only for its own profit, the more he will treat the information the firm transmits as unreliable. In particular, regardless of a candidate's other values (for instance, being sensitive to ecological issues), information about the engagement of a firm in activities that accord with his values will not increase the attractiveness of a firm's offer, as the information will be seen as unreliable.

In order to achieve a situation where a strong threat of unemployment is not a factor modifying candidates' choices in appraising a firm's offer, it was clearly indicated to the persons taking part in the study that several equally attractive job offers were available to them, and thus their choice consisted in applying to one or another firm in first order. In addition, information about the firms' pro-ecological and anti-ecological activities was only one of several types of information about the firms' activities to be presented (such as activities on behalf of the firm's employees, a higher remuneration than at the competitor's, or activities on behalf of the local community).

The research subjects were 79 students in a course of study for employees in the field of management and psychology; they were around 30 years of age. They were given a questionnaire, which was filled in controlled context, and on which on a 5-point Likert scale defined the degree of increased or decreased desire to apply to a specific organization as an effect of the information found on its internet site. All the persons were employed and their age and studies indicate that they were at an early stage in their professional careers. The choices of such respondents are dictated by the generally recognized higher sensitivity of young people to values.

The pro-ecological values of candidates were measured by the candidates' declarations of their personal activities on behalf of the natural environment during the previous month, and the candidates' attitude toward capitalism was determined by their answers to two questions on whether 'firms always act solely for their own profit'.

## 6. Results of the research

The data used to verify the hypotheses is presented below.

**Table 1.** Percentages of respondents, who will apply to the firm as a first choice, base on information on its www (responses: "strongly increases" and "increase" counted together) (source: own research)

Information content	Increased will for application as a first choice among environmental engaged respondents (n = 24)	Increased will for application as a first choice among environmental un-engaged respondents (n = 55)
The company runs pro-ecological programs (waste recycling, paper double side use, etc.)	75%	55%
The company runs group commuting because of environmental protection	80%	50%
The company runs its business with respect for ecology	83%	65%
The company sponsors some environmental activities	83%	50%

The data contained in the table above allows hypothesis 1 to be verified positively, while no confirmation was found for hypothesis 2. Presenting information about a casual pro-ecological engagement (subsidizing pro-ecological activities and a declaration of general concern) increased the attractiveness of a given organization the most, while providing specific examples of engagement resulted in a weaker change. However, taking into account the small size of the test group, these dif-

ferences were not found to be large, and thus on the basis of the above data it can be stated solely that information about ecological activities acts more strongly on persons who are pro-ecologically engaged (hypothesis 1), regardless of the specificity of the information given (contrary to hypothesis 2). It should be clearly stated that in both groups the revelation of information about pro-ecological activities of any type did not produce a drop in eagerness to apply to a company, and thus the desire to apply of persons not covered in the above table could be expected not to undergo any change as a result of such information.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 can be verified by the data contained in the table below.

**Table 2.** Percentages of respondents, who will change their will to apply to the company as a first choice, base on information about its ecological crime. (source: own research)

		The company commit an environmental crime recently			Total
Type of respondent		Strongly decrease	Rather decrease	Un-change	
Anti-capitalistic	environmental engaged	6 (43%)	7	1	14 (100%)
	Unengaged	17 (61%)	4	7	28 (100%)
Pro-capitalistic	environmental engaged	3 (30%)	5	2	10 (100%)
	Unengaged	12 (44%)	6	9	27 (100%)
Total		48%	28%	24%	79 (100%)

From the above data it can be confirmed that a company's commission of an ecological crime negatively impacts job-seekers' evaluation of the company's attractiveness as a place of employment only slightly more strongly among persons who do not have confidence in the credibility of firms (anti-capitalists) than among those who have such confidence (pro-capitalists). In the first group, 19% remained neutral to the news about the ecological crime committed by the firm to which they were considering applying, while 30% of the second group was unmoved.

If the above data is analyzed from the perspective of the respondents' declared engagement in pro-ecological activities, both groups have a negative attitude about applying to a firm that has committed an ecological crime and – contrary to hypothesis 3 – in the group that is ecologically engaged such a reaction is slightly more frequent (the desire to apply decreased among 88% of ecologically engaged persons and among 71% of those not so engaged). However, the strength of this reaction is in accordance with hypothesis 3,

that is, the desire to apply decreases much more among the group that is not engaged in pro-ecological activities (53% of them would definitely not apply to such a firm) than among the group of pro-ecologically engaged persons (37% of them would definitely not apply).

This constitutes a partial confirmation of hypothesis 3, which stated that negative information about a firm would lessen the respondents' desire to apply to that firm, regardless of the values held by the respondents (that is, whether the information contains negative content in terms of the respondents' values). Although, contrary to the hypothesis, this information has a negative impact on a larger percentage of pro-ecologically engaged persons, it has a stronger (more negative) influence on persons who are not engaged pro-ecologically.

Lack of trust in capitalism emerged as a factor raising by over a dozen percent the number of persons who would definitely not apply to a firm that had committed an ecological crime. The same occurred both in the group of those pro-ecologically engaged as in those who were not so engaged, and this is thus a confirmation of hypothesis 4.

## 7. Summary and conclusions

Within the framework of contemporary recruitment efforts, companies attempt to promote their job offers through branding information. The choice of information that will have the strongest impact on the firm's target group is a subject of scientific discussion. To state that every company should strive for an Employee Value Proposition that will make the company's offer stand out from those of its competitors misses the point of the dialogue occurring in relevant circles, outside the company borders.

Two scientific theories analyzing the effects of the information that reaches potential candidates predict different reactions to negative information about a firm's activities depending on the values the candidate holds: the theory of organizational fit points to the strong negative impact solely of information connected directly with the candidate's values, while the signalling theory points to the negative impact of all information typically considered negative.

The aim of this research was to make an initial analysis of the adequacy of applying the explanations of signalling and cultural fit theories to online recruitment. The study showed that the different approaches offered by these two theories supplement each other. On the basis of the answers received in the questionnaire survey,

which collected the reactions of respondents placed in a hypothetical e-recruitment situation where they had several equally attractive job offers, it was found that positive information connected with a firm's pro-ecological activities and negative information in the same sphere affect a candidate in a manner that is better explained by, respectively, the theory of cultural fit and the signalling theory. In accordance with the theory of cultural fit (hypotheses 1 and 2) it was found that information about specific activities and the general pro-ecological attitude of firms increases the desire of persons who declare themselves to be pro-ecologically engaged to apply to those firms. A better explanation of the reaction of respondents in regard to information about a firm's having committed an ecological crime is provided by signalling theory, in accordance with which all candidates, independently of their values, are less inclined to apply to a given firm under the influence of negative information.

This conclusion constitutes another refinement of the different impact of negative and positive information in a recruitment situation. Previously it has been stated that negative information has a much stronger impact than positive information (see the overview of research in Woźniak 2013). If the arguments presented above are considered sufficient, it may be said that positive and negative information act by different mechanisms: positive information through the control mechanism of cultural fit, while the negative – through signalling.

The contributions of the text are as follows:

1. It shows that the impact of positive and negative information about companies on their attractiveness is different.
2. It shows that the effects of positive information can be explained using fit theory, and negative – using signalling theory.
3. It shows how some factors in the communication situation may change the strength of these effects:
  - a. The level of of information does not change the strength of its impact
  - b. Lack of trust in the benevolence of the employer strengthens the impact of negatively loaded information.

The reservations mentioned above indicate the necessity for broader research in the area under discussion here and result from the clear limitations of the study. The test group was small and composed of a specific group of job applicants. Furthermore, it could be argued that answering questions in a survey sets in motion different decision-making mechanisms than do activities connected with applying for a job and thus the results

of research on a group outside of a recruitment situation have limited value for generalizing about such a situation.

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