

Review

The elephant in the room: Understanding recruitment pitfalls in NGOs

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This commentary can be considered as an appeal to the leaders of humanitarian aid and developmental organizations (commonly referred to as Non-Governmental Organizations or NGOs) to critically reflect on the existing recruitment process and take corrective measures to address a number of grave concerns. The paper argues that the recruitment process is now often power-centric, which not only provides limited space for transparency and accountability but also compromises candidates' respect in any given recruitment process. This power-centric approach may not necessarily enable the organization to select individuals with a genuine passion or to retain passionate employees even after they are hired. The paper encourages leaders and Human Resource professionals to engage in conversations by critically reflecting on a series of uncomfortable issues that are presented here, followed by the formalization of a code of conduct that establishes how organizations will treat candidates.

Key words: Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), recruitment, human resource (HR).

INTRODUCTION

A full-cycle recruitment process involves multiple steps, including preparation, sourcing, screening, selection and hiring. Throughout this process, recruiters and applicants interact in various ways, reflecting the organization's culture to its leaders and allowing applicants to gain insights into the organizational culture as they progress. The recruitment process in the humanitarian aid and development sector has evolved significantly over the past three decades due to various factors, including sector growth, a surge in the number of applicants, financial constraints limiting the Human Resource Department's structure, increased demand for transparency and

accountability, the adoption of technology, and the use of recruiting agents. While organizations strive to hire the best candidates, they often balance these factors with narrowly defined transparency and accountability principles and a power-centric approach, which can have a negative impact on organizational culture and staff retention.

Based on nearly three decades of professional experience in this sector, the author would like to argue that the concept of transparency and accountability in the recruitment process has evolved into an internal organizational system primarily focused on a fair process

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through extensive documentation. The current emphasis is on shortlisting applicants using exclusionary parameters, conducting multiple rounds of structured interviews with discrete questions, involving all powerful stakeholders, and relying on aggregated scoring and thorough documentation. However, transparency and accountability in the recruitment process should encompass three key aspects: (a) Establishing an internal organizational system for a fair process, (b) Disclosing all exclusion principles to all applicants, and (c) Providing constructive feedback to shortlisted candidates who progress through various interview stages. The Overseas Development Institute in the UK published a working paper in June 2006, in which the authors highlighted major concerns related to staff turnover in humanitarian agencies, which subsequently diminish the organizations' effectiveness in program delivery (Loquercio et al., 2006). In recent years, several authors have underscored that employee turnover in these organizations is an ongoing issue (Dubey et al., 2015; Korff et al., 2015). While some attribute excessive staff turnover to external factors, such as donors' emphasis on low overhead and the promotion of short-term contracts through brief funding cycles, others point to work-related issues and personal characteristics, including a lack of staff development opportunities. Additionally, the author contends that organizational culture, intertwined with power dynamics, is also a crucial factor influencing staff retention.

The power-centric approach of recruiters is evident not only in the narrowly defined transparency and accountability framework but also in other aspects, such as the involvement of powerful actors in the interview process and the style of communication with applicants. Job applicants experience this culture during the recruitment process, and their initial experience significantly shapes their perception of the organization's culture and power structure. This, in turn, has a critical impact on their mindset regarding short- or long-term commitments to the organization. Therefore, a power-centric approach may not necessarily facilitate the selection of passionate individuals or the retention of passionate employees even after they are hired.

ACKNOWLEDGING UNCOMFORTABLE ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

There is no 'magic bullet' that will address all the abovementioned concerns in the recruitment process. However, leaders of humanitarian aid and development organizations should acknowledge that they have a responsibility for the current situation and could do much more to improve it. Conversations would be encouraged among leaders and human resource professionals by critically reflecting on a series of uncomfortable issues and questions, which have been outlined based on experiential learning.

Exclusion principles

Designing the recruitment process based on exclusion principles is very damaging for the organizational culture. The common exclusion parameters include but are not limited to age, gender, religious identity, nationality, etc. The use of exclusion parameters based on the pregnancy of female candidates is not uncommon, as recruiters do not want to accommodate the cost of maternity leave. The use of exclusion principles not only compromises the ethical and moral standing of the existing staff members in the organization but also facilitates a recruitment process that has the potential to fast-forward the exclusion of passionate persons and/or persons from disadvantaged groups in an unfair way.

Job profile

It is not uncommon to encounter job profiles that are loaded with various jargon and lists of competencies, often in an attempt to recruit exceptional individuals. Job profiles play a significant role in the exclusion process, as applicants are frequently shortlisted based on the presence of matching jargon in their resumes and the job profile. While the extensive use of jargon in job profiles can reflect the organization's knowledge level and ideological stance, it may not always be effective in identifying the right candidate who needs to possess skills beyond jargon to succeed in the role. What is particularly of concern is when job profiles include an exhaustive list of tasks and also state that job holders must be ready to perform any other tasks delegated by line management.

Use of technology

In today's recruitment landscape, the extensive use of technology as an intermediary between organizations and candidates is a common practice. Automation spans from the submission of applications to automated regret letters for candidates. Technology is also frequently employed to sift through a large pool of applicants. Many organizations have taken it a step further by incorporating automated, time-bound video interviews as the initial step in the interview process.

The use of psychometric tests is also prevalent, especially for leadership positions, although in-depth discussions with candidates based on test outcomes are seldom held. While the use of technology is essential, it is crucial to determine where the line should be drawn to infuse a human touch into the applicant experience during the recruitment process. A healthy organizational culture within the recruitment process strives to provide that human touch sooner rather than later.

Internal candidates

Two key staff retention strategies involve ensuring career

progression and offering preferential treatment to internal candidates. However, there are situations when recruiters ask internal candidates to undergo the interview process as a means of balancing power relations, even when they have already decided not to hire them. In such cases, internal candidates who are not selected may feel betrayed and may develop hostile relationships with their colleagues. Conversely, there are situations in which recruiters plan to hire internal candidates but still go through a formal recruitment process for compliance or other reasons. Recruitment is a time-consuming process for both recruiters and applicants, and it is unfair to ask external candidates to participate without informing them that there are internal candidates who may receive preferential treatment. The lack of transparency in addressing both internal and external candidates significantly undermines organizational culture and can lead to reputational damage in various ways.

Written tests

While it is understandable that written tests are required for many crucial positions within organizations, the study concern lies with their use as an exclusionary process when recruiting for leadership positions. Many candidates view this practice as disrespectful. Is it a sound practice for recruiters to administer written tests for senior leadership positions, especially when candidates have a proven track record of holding similar positions in comparable organizations for many years? The organization's culture is also reflected in how they allocate limited time for the written test, which may make it impossible for candidates to complete the test within the given timeframe.

Interview panel

Is the organization forming panels and determining the number of interviews rounds to ensure the participation of every influential person and relevant stakeholders within the organization's interview process? Does the organization set rigid interview schedules with short notice to accommodate the busy schedules of its influential members? Unfortunately, there have been instances where individuals received less than a day's notice from highly reputable organizations to appear for a test. Therefore, the questions mentioned above can serve as a self-reflection for any organization.

Style of interview

In many organizations, it is common practice to assemble panels comprising numerous influential members, each of whom takes turns in asking a series of structured questions to candidates. This approach often prioritizes a rigid question-and-answer format over engaging in

meaningful conversations with candidates to understand their passion and relevant knowledge and experience. The structured question-answer system frequently results in frequent interruptions to remind candidates to provide concise responses while also expecting them to elaborate on answers with relevant examples. The prepared structured questions are often biased towards internal candidates who are more familiar with organizational jargon, ideology, systems and so on. Additionally, when it comes to hypothetical questions, panel members often anticipate right or wrong answers from candidates, rather than fostering open discussions. Regrettably, panel members often neglect to create thorough notes at the end of interviews, which hinders the organization's ability to send personalized feedback to candidates when they are not selected for the position. The recruitment process should be considered a platform for both recruiters and applicants to engage in respectful conversations and get to know each other. However, there is often a lack of institutional mechanisms to ensure that panel members are adequately trained to conduct interviews with due respect for the candidates.

Other unwanted practices

Many organizations ask the last employer during a reference check about the number of sick leave days that the candidate took in the last number of years. The offer of a discriminatory pay package considering the identity of the selected candidate is also not uncommon. Many organizations do not revert to the candidates with any form of communication once the interview process is over and the people are not hired. There are many other undesirable practices that dominate the recruitment process.

CONCLUSION

It is imperative for leaders in the humanitarian aid and development sector to critically reflect on the existing recruitment process and take corrective measures to address existing concerns. Conscious or unconscious use of any exclusion principle simply does not correspond well with the ethical standard of humanitarian aid and development organizations. Every candidate deserves to be respected throughout the recruitment process, but sadly, many organizations still do not treat candidates as well as they should. Feedback loops and honest dialogue are often missing within organizations, but practically, they should be the essential aspects of a culture of transparency and accountability in the recruitment process. The author would like to argue that it is time for leaders in the humanitarian aid and development sector to formalize a code of conduct that establishes how organizations will treat candidates. Clarke (2017) has given very clear guidance to that effect, and some of his suggestions include the following:

1. We will honor your time.
2. We will treat you with respect.
3. We will always be forthright and transparent.

A clear statement of values also shows what matters to organizations beyond just talent acquisition, which is a huge part of recruiters' value proposition. Both candidates and the existing workforce will appreciate it resulting in improving the culture of the organizations and maintaining the motivation levels among the entire workforces. A recruitment process that rewards transparency and accountability create a virtuous cycle that supports and replenishes organizational culture.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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