

**SURFING FOR SUCCESS: THE CONVERGENCE OF HUMAN RESOURCE
INFORMATION SYSTEMS (HRIS) AND CMC**

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Abstract:

Recent Shifts in HRIS, coupled with an increasing migration of workers onto the Internet, has led to a radically new job search/employee search environment. While the trend towards electronic human resource management has been discussed since the 1960's, the structural conditions which allow it to take place did not emerge until the mid 1990's. This paper tracks the precursors, current forms, and present problems of computer mediated human resource management (CMRM).

1 Introduction

In most of the literature dealing with job-search, there has been little emphasis placed on recruitment issues and vice-versa (e.g. Schwab, et al, 1987; Saks, 1994; for an exception, see Nicholson, 1987). This situation, to my mind, has led to an unnatural decoupling of what is, in fact, a set of complementary processes: job-search strategies rely on implicit models of recruitment and recruitment strategies rely on implicit models of job-search strategies.

To treat the two as separate is both pragmatically foolish and analytically irresponsible. If, on the other hand, we view the two processes as different facets of a larger process of social placement we both improve our analytic models and, at the same

time, bring an emergent situation in line with previously studied processes operating in other cultures.¹

Any conceptual combination of the job-search, candidate search processes must start from two basic observations. First, these processes only operate in cultures that do not overtly prescribe social roles for their members and, by corollary, where individual organizations are relatively free to choose their members. In other words, in order for a search to exist, there must be a requirement for it to exist. The second observation flows from the first: search processes will be increasingly complex, and with a tendency towards the chaotic, in proportion to the degrees of freedom of the search parameters.

With these two observations as starting points we are in a position to state the basic "problem" behind the emergence of both job-search and candidate search strategies. The problem may be stated simply as "how do people end up being and doing what they should be and do?". This "simple" statement, however, relies on culture specific interpretations of three key concepts: "being", "doing", and "should". How a given culture interprets these three concepts produces, in part, the degrees of freedom that define the "openness" of the search parameters. If an individual cannot "be" something, then they may not legitimately "do" what that "beingness" requires and, as such, "should" not fulfil that social role.

Cultural interpretations are not the sole factors that determine these parameters. Over the past hundred years it has become obvious that technological innovations and environmental conditions play at least as significant a role. Consider, by way of

¹ This argument implicitly assumes a model of social processes which emerge from previous historical models and levels of less complexity. For more on this, see Tyrrell (1996, forthcoming).

example, the redefinition of "should" that happened during the First and Second World Wars regarding the "proper" role of women in North America.

1 The Late Industrial Age

Throughout the 20th century, technological developments have increasingly divorced physical labour from material rewards while, at the same time, increasing the competency requirements for accessing these rewards. The era from the end of World War I until the late 1960's, the late Industrial Age, was characterized by certain key cultural interpretations of "being", "doing" and "should".

Access to most of the social roles under the heading of "work" was fairly strictly controlled by a number of means. Despite the cultural icon status of Rosie the Riveter, there is no doubt that women's access to specific jobs and professions was quite strictly controlled by cultural norms. At the same time, male access to specific jobs and professions was also controlled by a combination of professionalization (i.e. required cultural capital) and enculturation (cf. Willis, 1977). At the same time, the later half of this period was also characterized by what can only be described as a "loyalty for security" social contract (cf. Whyte, 1956).

For most of the Late Industrial Age, say up until the late 1970's, job-search strategies consisted of two main types: credentialization² and networking. Credentialization strategies centered on matching predefined candidate search requirements in such areas as degrees, work experience, and "bare-bones" resumes and matching these with formal candidate search procedures. Networking strategies still

² On the rise of credentialism, see Buon (1997).

required appropriate credentials, but relied on additional opportunity information via personal and professional networks. In short, they took advantage of informal candidate search procedures.

2 The Early Silicon Age I

The interregnum of restructuring, mergers, and acquisitions flowing through the collapse of this social contract marked the development and spread of radically new job-search technologies (cf. NFB, 1981) and, in Canada at any rate, a common-law insistence on corporate responsibility (cf. Grossman, 1984, 1988). This period, which crystallized around 1982 in Canada, also marked a change in candidate search practices both as the new job-search practices spread and as HR departments became swamped with resumes.

As with many corporate functions, Human Resources had increasingly come under pressure to cut costs. In part, this cost-cutting pressure was met by an increasing use of computers not only as record keeping devices, but also as report production devices and to handle compensation, training, skills inventories, and recruitment (cf. Glueck, 1978:17-18, 121-122, 167). The advent of relatively inexpensive mini-computers in the early to mid 1970's had spread the practice of computerizing many Human Resource Management (HRM) practices to a broad range of organizations who had previously been unable to own a mainframe.

The computerization of HR functions was not the only cost cutting measure available. A number of studies examining the effects of different sources of recruitment had clearly shown that informal sources of recruitment tended to produce candidates that had a lower turnover and a better "fit" than recruitment through more formal channels (see Saks, 1994 for a review). Certainly, informal recruitment sources, in other words

personal networking by candidates, was not only less expensive than more formal processes but also dovetailed nicely with the emphasis on networking in the new job-search practices (e.g. Bolles, 1993; Morin, 1990).

The period from the early 1980's to the early 1990's was marked by increasingly desperate job-search tactics. Anecdotal evidence abounds amongst HR managers, temp recruiters and others about the increasingly innovative tactics developed by job searchers in order to catch hiring managers' attentions (see, for example, Jackson, 1991 [1978]). During the later half of the 1980's and into the early 1990's, informal networking techniques expanded into the newly emerging bulletin board systems (BBS's) that were spreading throughout North America. BBS's provided not only job opportunities but, more importantly, access to information about projects, companies and future opportunities.

3 The Early Silicon Age II

At the same time, HR cost-cutting pressure was interacting with newer computer technologies, primarily OCR scanning software and web development, to produce an environment where HR became the driving force behind many corporate web sites (Doran, 1996a). These pressures reached their critical point in the 18 months between January of 1995 and July of 1996. From the HR side, the deployment and use of web based recruiting material offered significant benefits in terms of costs, time, reach, and "formalism".

The ability to formalize the recruitment process mirrored the formalization of the Late Industrial Age, but placed the emphasis on skills and competencies rather than on specific credentials. In part, this stemmed from the recognition of the need to create

"learning cultures" within the workplace in order to stay competitive. At the same time, there was a recognition that degree based certification was insufficient to guarantee the necessary skills, since the half-life of most high tech skills is measured in months rather than decades.³

The return to formalism was also necessitated by an increasing recognition that resume fraud was rampant in both the United States (Bachler, 1995) and Canada (Doran, personal communication). In a number of cases, the development of the Internet has been blamed for the spread of resume fraud (e.g. Menefee, 1998); a situation that struck at the heart of Web-based recruiting. Over the past several years, manufacturers of Human Resources Information Systems (HRIS) have produced a variety of products claiming to extract skills from resumes (e.g. Resume Assistant) or to provide a clear picture of competencies (e.g. SkillScape). In a few areas, the skills can actually be examined in a formal, web-based testing system (e.g. www.medhunters.com, www.skillscape.com),⁴ but most of the systems are, at present, reminiscent of creating gaming characters with particular attributes and skill levels.

4 Resumes, and the formal/informal candidate search

While Doran (personal communication) predicts that resumes will disappear, I am not so sure. In many ways, resumes are still too useful a tool: if not for candidate selected, then for the elimination of candidates both during the recruiting process and

³ This recognition, in turn, was behind the redefinition of competencies away from skills and the growing formalization of interpersonal and emotional competencies.

⁴ See Doran, 1998.

after a hire if it can be shown that they lied on their resumes. I suspect that the courts in both Canada and the United States, which uphold the concept of wrongful dismissal for resume fraud, would extend that protection to cover candidates who successfully pass formal corporate competency testing procedures.

From the job-search side, resumes still make a lot of sense, at least if they are used in their fullest. According to most manuals,⁵ the production of the resume is an end in and of itself: a course of self-assessment as well as the production of a necessary job-search tool. For many recruiters as well, the crafting of a resume gives initial insights into the character of candidates even before an interview (Patterson, 1997). Finally, most of the current and projected HRIS software still relies on the existence of a resume, even if their use is limited.

While it was quite feasible for people to talk about "formal" and "informal" methods of recruitment in the Late Industrial Age, such a distinction is much less relevant at the present time. Recruiters expect candidates to know more about their companies (cf. Hergenrather, 1998), a trend that was an essential component of the new job-search strategies. This "informal" knowledge gathering is now coupled in with web-based recruiting, for example the news articles on companies tied to job listings on the Globe and Mail's site (<http://www.globecareers.com/>).

Much of the shift towards Internet-based recruiting concerned not only the revisioning of HR and the ability to cut costs, but also the utility of recruiters to find appropriate candidates and keep abreast of current issues (cf. Doran, 1996, 1997a, 1997b,

⁵ This is based on manuals gathered from the four largest outplacement companies in Canada during the course of my Ph.D. fieldwork and on interviews conducted with various counselors. Similar arguments can be found in Bolles (1993), Snodgrass (1996), and other published manuals.

1997c, 1997d). List-serves, the descendents of BBS's, have been used both by HR professionals and by job-searchers as ways to gather information, keep abreast of developments, and obtain job/candidate leads (Doran, 1997c, 1997d; Tyrrell, 1996), and similar use is made of some dedicated chat rooms.

5 Some effects of the recent shifts

This shift towards the Internet for job/candidate searching has reset the parameters of searches. In *When Work Disappears*, Wilson (1996) noted that certain economic and spatial considerations had changed the job/candidate search, at least as far as inner cities in the US was concerned. What was not covered in his analysis, since it wasn't that prominent during the time of his research, is the para-spatial effects of shifting job/candidate searches to the Internet.

As we all know, access to Cyberspace is not governed as much by geography as it is by a combination of skill, access to equipment, and knowledge of where to look and how to act. And, while this realization is behind current federal attempts to increase access, there are still certain issues that have not been addressed; in particular the requisite time and skill needed to establish a 'Net presence (see Tyrrell, 1996), and the requirement for multiple forms of job-search tools. I want to examine this last issue in some detail.

The development of email, OCR scanners, and web-based application systems has been a boon for HR departments, at least in as much as it automates the initial cuts on candidates through automation. For the job-searcher, on the other hand, it had added in another barrier. Rather than having one major resume that can be tailored for individual

jobs, job-searchers are now required to have at least two, if not three or more, different base resumes on hand at all times.

This requirement is an artifact of the technology used to import resumes into HR databases. The minimum requirements are a print version of the resume and a text (.txt) version suitable for email submission, and for the "cut-and-paste" forms of a number of online applications (e.g. Consumers Gas, Canadian Tire, etc.). If the job-searcher wishes to have any kind of an edge, they will also have to craft an electronic keyword resume, which may well differ drastically from their print version and must be tailored for each opportunity. In some cases, resumes are also being put on web-pages (e.g. <http://www.cybrinc.com/bob/>).

All of this resume tailoring, to say nothing about opportunity identification and research, relies on constant access to both computers and to the Internet. Furthermore, having "a" computer is not adequate for most job-search activities. It is necessary to have access to a computer and web browser that can support all of the latest "bells and whistles" that are coming to adorn various corporate and job-search sites and a connection that is fast enough to access these sites. At the time of writing, this means a minimum of a Pentium 100 with 16 MB of RAM and MS Explorer v3+ or Netscape v3+ and a connection rate of 14,400 kb/s. Even with this type of a system, many sites are not accessible.

This accessibility issue may well create problems for HR departments in the future, since otherwise promising candidates will be at a disadvantage in applying for jobs. Furthermore, the very skills necessary to conduct successful job searches also produce international networks ("communities"; see Tyrrell, forthcoming) that increase

the likelihood of the candidate either leaving the organization voluntarily or being headhunted.⁶ One possible solution may be the development of application kiosks for the general public, but that may not be economically feasible.

6 Conclusions

It is currently quite clear that the shift of recruitment activities to the Internet will continue. While the situation is still fluid, mainly because of the rapid development of the technology, there are some clear implications for both HR professionals and job-searchers. First, any search strategy that does not include a web-based component is too limited to produce acceptable opportunities/candidates. Second, there shift to Internet recruiting/job-searching is acting as a preliminary "cut" of candidates based on a constellation of computer literacy, time and access. Third, the pool of potential candidates has expanded to global proportions but, at the same time, the area of headhunting has expanded to the same proportions.

I started by arguing that we have to consider job searching and candidate searching as an integrated process relating to social placement. Throughout this paper, I have tried to show how the two systems are inextricably linked, even if the people involved in the process did not realize it.⁷ While questions of social placement are clearly culturally defined in part, I hope that I have also shown that their operational environments, both social and technological, also play a central role in this definition.

⁶ A situation which is rampant in the high tech sectors of Canada.

⁷ In some ways, this argument derives from the Malinowski's (1965[1935]) arguments concerning land tenure in the Trobriands. This is not surprising since I draw heavily on Malinowski in my work (e.g. Tyrrell, forthcoming).

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