

Quality of the Hiring Process: Action Research in the Belgian Armed Forces

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In line with theories on multiparty collaboration, we assume that different parties within an organization have different objectives and diverging perspectives on how to reach these objectives. In this research we investigated the various perspectives on 'quality of recruitment and selection' within the Belgian Defence. The views of all key figures involved in the hiring process were collected, by using focus groups, face-to-face interviews, and workshops. An action research approach was chosen in order to increase commitment and lay the foundations for later organizational changes. Preliminary results indicate that there is no such thing as 'the perspective of the organization', and that stakeholders define quality in accordance with their perceived objectives and role within the hiring process. The implications of such results for accession policy are discussed.

I. Definition of the problem

Looking at the selection literature of the past decades to determine relevant parties in selection, mainly two parties come into picture. Studies have been described as well on the recruiter's point of view (e.g., Rynes & Boudreau, 1986; Stevens, Mitchell, & Tripp, 1990) as on the applicants' point of view (e.g., Bauer et al., 2001; Chan, Schmitt, Sacco, & DeShon, 1998; Macan, Avedon, Paese, & Smith, 1994) as, sometimes, on the 'interaction' of both views (e.g., Macan & Dipboye, 1990; Powell & Goulet, 1996; Stevens, 1997; Tullar, 1989). Despite the fact that such studies deepen our insight in phenomena playing by two important parties, these research designs imply an abstraction of factors such as organizational culture, power and influence dynamics of other 'third' parties, the multifaceted reality of the problem,....

We started our research from two concerns. A first, practical concern reveals when we try to use these studied perspectives to analyze the accession policy (recruitment and selection) of a specific organization, i.c. Belgian Defence. Taking the perspectives of

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applicant and recruiter limits our search in ways of optimizing the existing procedures in Belgian Defence. It seems that studies are too micro-oriented to support a more organization-oriented view on the recruitment and selection policy. A second, theoretical concern is in line with those 'practical' experiences. In considering selection literature of the past decade, we experience a trend towards more experimental research designs of micro-problems. Despite, for example, the efforts on researching 'perceptions' of applicants in recent applicant reaction-studies, we can not escape the impression that it's a rather mechanical approach of perceptions and feelings of applicants, induced by the way this topic has been studied. Occasionally, we detect some calls in research on rethinking the way selection is approached, by suggesting broadening the theoretical framework (Ramsay & Scholarios, 1999) or by proposing new paradigms (e.g., Roe, 1996).

In our research we want to extend the scope by involving all relevant parties. Taking into account all the divergent perspectives should create a detailed vision on selection within the Belgian Defence. In addition, we assume that people are willing to take recommendations more seriously when we can offer them a well founded overview and when we create commitment from the beginning of the research project by involving all the relevant parties in the research activity.

To create that kind of commitment and feelings of ownership, we have chosen for an action research design. By using this approach, we want to bring in a new research method in selection research, but as we will show, it is well-considered in this organization supporting design.

All that has led us to the following research questions:

1. Which views and opinions do exist within the Belgian Defence concerning the topic "quality of selection and recruitment"? Which correspondences and which differences do we see when we compare all those different views?
2. How can we use the results of this research to optimize the selection procedures of the Belgian armed forces in collaboration with all the involved authorities?

As one can notice, those two questions point to a different level of our research. The first question stipulates the content-level; the second question tries to discover ways on a process-level according to our action research-design.

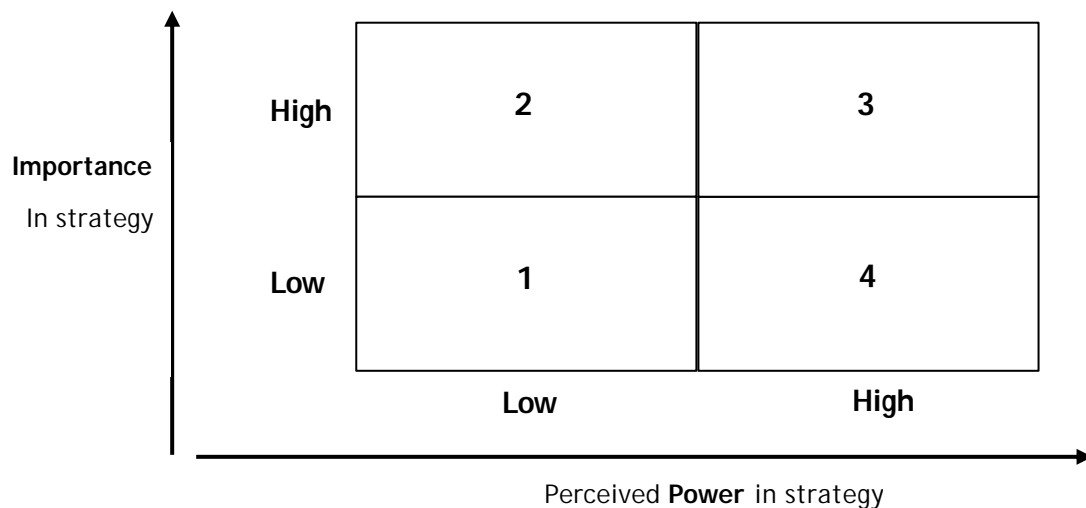
II. Theoretical background

First we will describe the method we have used during this research project. We will illustrate two theoretical concepts. The first one is "multi-party collaboration". This is the framework of our research and the way we have conceived the research questions. The second one is "action research". We will clarify the basic concepts of action research when describing the used method.

1. Multi-party collaboration

When people of different groups, institutions or social categories come together to work on a task or problem domain, we can call it multiparty collaboration. We want to use this multi-party theory as a framework for our research. Barbara Gray (1989) tells us more when multi-party collaboration is needed, we lighten up some principles and translate them immediately to our research context of Belgian Defence.

- *The problems are ill-defined, or there is disagreement about how they should be defined.* One can argue that the selection problem in Belgian Defence is a well-defined problem. The existence of a legal framework set up in agreement with different parties can strengthen this idea. The question is whether the parties involved in selection are the same as those that made the agreement, and whether a law gives the illusion of a well-defined problem.
- *Several stakeholders have a vested interest in the problems and are interdependent.* When looking at multi-party collaboration we can define several stakeholders dealing - in their way - with a multifaceted problem. To analyse stakeholders involved, Huxham (1996) gives a framework based on two dimensions: the power- and the importance-dimension. Combining these two, the following quadrant appears.



The people and services in cell 1 are not that important for this research, because they are not directly involved.

Cell 2 contains the executors of selection and hiring tasks and those who experience directly the consequences of the selection process. Cell 3 contains the people who

outline selection policy. Those two cells are very important in this research because those people are directly involved in the hiring process.

Cell 4 contains people who have a lot of decision power but are not directly involved with selection, like the Minister of Defence, the chief head of Defence and the cabinets. We also try to involve these people, because their approval is needed to take actions based on our recommendations.

- *There may be a disparity of power and/or resources for dealing with the problems among the stakeholders and incremental or unilateral efforts to deal with the problems typically produce less than satisfactory solutions.* Defence as organization is embedded in a hierarchical and explicit political context, which sharpens power and influence dynamics. There may be a (strict) distinction between parties who make policies and those who carry them out.
- *These stakeholders are not necessarily identified a priori or organized in any systematic way.* The relevance of this aspect lies in the fact that we are not only interested in executors of the selection tasks, but also -and most of all- in every party who has the feeling being involved in the selection process or experiences directly the consequences of the selection, like trainers and military units.

One of the key principles of multiparty collaboration is the existence of interaction for a certain problem so stakeholders can find common ground to frame and act upon the problem that is set up.

A shared definition of the problem and a shared future-vision are crucial to reach well founded action plans.

2. Action Research

“Action research is social research carried out by a team encompassing a professional action researcher and members of an organization or community seeking to improve their situation. Action research promotes broad participation in the research process and supports action leading to a more just or satisfying situation for the stakeholders.” (Greenwood & Levin, 1998).

Action research is based on participation and action. It is a way to create a framework in which our multi-party collaboration can take place, and it is a research method which stimulates commitment of the involved parties.

Action research demands a specific role and attitude of the researchers. That role can be described the best as a ‘facilitator’-role. It’s trying to facilitate the collaboration and communication process during the research project. It’s shaping the conditions in which the

collaboration and the research process can evolve optimum. Being focused on the process, on the way things are done, is crucial.

In this researcher-attitude, we can distinguish four basic principles (Stringer, 1999):

- Relationships. Establishing and maintaining positive working relations is one of the key factors when you want to reach something with different parties. It is creating a safe environment, where different parties can feel equal and where they can deal with conflicts in a constructive way.
- Communication. Action researchers should be a guard of the communication process during the research project. Communication between researchers and involved parties and communication between those parties should be understandable, truthful, sincere and appropriate. Facilitating that kind of communication is one of the researcher's duties.
- Participation. When you want people to follow your recommendations, they should better be prepared. By involving the relevant parties from the beginning of the research project, we create commitment and feelings of ownership. Commitment and ownership stimulates their motivation to collaborate and to do really something with the research results. It is maximizing your chances to achieve something with your results, to attain real action.
- Inclusion. Including the different parties in all the aspects of the research project on an equal way, is another crucial factor to obtain a healthy and equal working situation.

Problems with this kind of research in Belgian Defence can sometimes be found in the fact that the qualitative -action research- principles often are not the same as the hierarchical and structured principles of the organization. Our experiences show that it asks a diplomatic and careful approach, looking for what kind of mandate you can get as researcher. However, in our case, it does not interfere with the research process, but communication in all directions stays a crucial factor. To motivate and involve all the relevant parties, we try to keep them informed on a regular basis.

In the rest of this article, we will describe how we have applied these theoretical guidelines in our research. Therefore, we have used some well-known action research tools, like focus groups, face-to-face interviews, workshops, etc.

III. Method

We will discuss our research methods in accordance with the research phase in which they are used. Those phases correspond mainly with our two posed research questions. Taking the second question as an ideal ending point -being: optimisation of the selection

procedures-, we can postulate that we had to take this ending point in account from the start of the research to define our methods. It's our opinion that we can only reach that optimisation, when we can motivate all relevant parties to collaborate and when we can stimulate people to change. That requires commitment and feelings of ownership of the involved parties. That's why we have chosen for a qualitative -action research- design. We can describe our role as researcher as the facilitator-role: bringing the right people together and motivate the people who have the power to make decisions.

A first step in answering the question "How can we reach that optimisation?" is finding an answer to the first research question: *"Which views and opinions do exist within the Belgian Defence concerning the topic "quality of selection and recruitment"? Which correspondences and which differences do we see when we compare all those different views?"*

1. Phase 1: Focus Group Sessions

Before we could answer that question, we had to make an opinion about 'what is quality of selection?' Quality can be defined in many ways. In literature for example, there is often been made a distinction between a static quality concept (reaching certain levels or standards of quality) and a dynamic quality concept (continuous improvement). However, we have chosen not to define the quality concept ourselves, but to ask experts in the field the basic question 'what is quality of selection in your opinion?' during three focus group sessions.

Focus groups are group interviews, often used in the beginning of an action research for explorative reasons. In this specific case, we used focus groups for the following reasons (reasons that we also have found in literature: Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990):

- collecting background information
- exploration of the research questions
- looking for new ideas and opinions
- getting a more detailed vision on research concepts
- collecting first impressions
- creating involvement

One of the interesting consequences of using focus group sessions, is the fact that we could involve important people from the very beginning of the research project. Even more, we are able to create feelings of ownership because the research is partially based on their assessment.

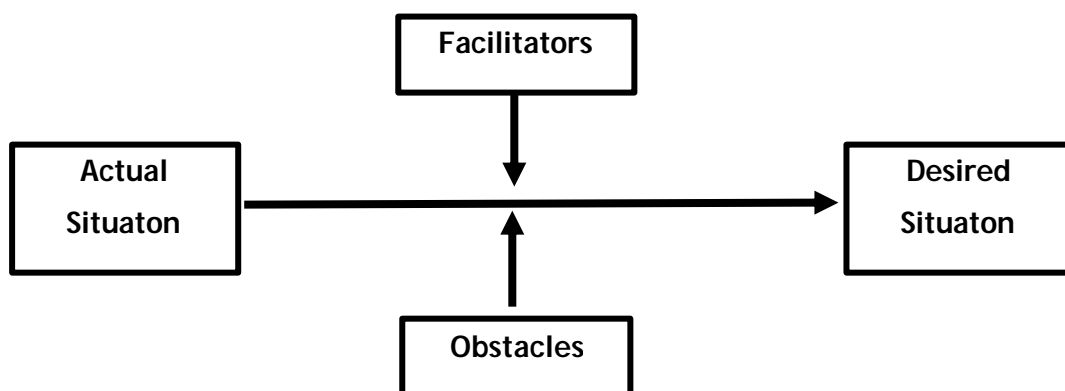
We organized three sessions with in each group around nine people. We invited people from different services like people who inform possible applicants, people who select applicants, people who outline selection policy and trainees of different military schools. There was an

extern moderator to lead the sessions. The sessions were observed by two observers (the researchers) and were videotaped.

These sessions were transcribed and analyzed by the researchers. The important themes and topics of these group sessions were used to make an interview guide for face-to-face interviews.

2. Phase 2: face-to-face interviews

The interview guide consists of five open questions (semi-structured). By posing these questions, we want to fill in the following model:



The information about the actual situation will be used to map the different existing opinions about quality of selection. The information about the desired situation will be used to formulate recommendations to the selection policy of the Belgian Defence.

We have defined all the key figures concerning selection within the Belgian Defence and invited these people for a face-to-face interview. First of all we want to map the opinions of these people. Thereby, with the principles of action research in mind, it is important for the success of this research project that these people feel committed to the project, so that they will be prepared to take in account the recommendations we will suggest. However, we have chosen to interview all the relevant parties, going from people in the field (military units) to the Minister of Defence. It is our opinion that not only the people who perform selection tasks are important for this research, but also every party who experiences directly the consequences of the selection process or is able to make decisions that influence the selection process.

IV. Conclusions

In this research, we tried to apply an unusual research paradigm in the Belgian Defence. Unusual, because Defence as organization is not used to this kind of research. We have tried to maximize the impact of our research by applying the basic principles of action research -relationships, communication, participation and inclusion- and by using important action research methods like focus groups and face-to-face interviews.

In accordance with multi-party collaboration literature, our role as researcher is being a facilitator: trying to bring the important and relevant parties together in a productive and stimulated created environment and trying to optimise the circumstances in which the collaboration take place.

We try to use a larger scope then the one who is usually used in selection research. We don't want to restrict our scope to recruiters and applicants, but we want to involve every relevant party like we have explained in this article. The feelings of involvement and ownership that we try to create should maximize the chances to reach our second goal: motivate people to take in account the recommendations that we will formulate, based on the results of this research. We try to research an organization-based phenomenon, and therefore, we try to use a macro-vision on the topic 'quality of selection and recruitment'. Although it is usual in selection literature to use a more micro-vision, action research principles and concepts are used to maximize the chances that real actions will consolidate our research results.

V. Discussion and implications

In this article, we presented our research project "Quality of the hiring process in the Belgian armed forces". As output of this project, we will formulate recommendations concerning the quality of the selection and hiring process. In order to maximize the chances that real actions will consolidate our research results, we have chosen for an action research design. We try to motivate all relevant parties to take in account our recommendations by creating commitment and feelings of ownership. Therefore, we used qualitative research tools like focus groups and face-to-face interviews.

The research project will be continued. A quantitative part will take place in the future. We have also planned a number of workshops. In these workshops, we will validate our results by giving feedback about the results to all parties involved. These results can be further discussed, in order to create a common ground and a shared vision on the problem. Stimulating this kind of dialogue between all parties should maximize the chances that concrete action plans can be made and executed.

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