



CENTRE FOR THE
STUDY OF DEMOCRACY

Policy Studies Building, Room 335
138 Union Street
Queen's University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada K7L 3N6
Tel: 613 533-6273 Fax: 613 533-2135
www.queensu.ca/csd

**Closing the Implementation Gap:
Improving capacity, accountability, performance and
human resource quality in the Canadian and Ontario
public service**

**Recruiting the best and brightest for
employment in Canada's public sector**

GLEND A FISK and AMIE SKATTEBO¹

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¹ This paper was written by Industrial-Organizational Psychologists
Glenda Fisk (School of Policy Studies; Queen's University)
and Amie Skattebo (Department of Psychology; Penn State University)

Contents

Introduction	3
Theories Informing Applicant Attraction and Recruitment	4
Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA; Schneider, 1987)	4
Person-Organization Fit (PO-Fit; Kristof, 1996)	5
Summary	5
Factors Influencing Recruitment Outcomes / Success	5
Organizational Characteristics	6
Characteristics of Recruitment Practices	7
Recruitment Sources	8
Formal vs. informal	8
Recruitment Policies and Processes	8
Characteristics of Jobs	9
Recruitment Challenges Facing Organizations Today	10
Employee Entitlement	10
Shifting Labor Pool Demographics and the Changing Nature of Work	10
Proliferation of Recruitment Technologies	10

Recruiting the Best and Brightest for Employment in Canada's Public Service

Introduction

Recruitment, attracting candidates to apply for positions, is often seen as an undesirable but necessary precursor to selecting (e.g., screening, testing, and hiring) employees; something often delegated to the newest, lowest ranking employees in an organization (Cluffs & Associates, 2001). Relatively more time is spent ensuring an organization has state-of-the-art selection devices, including the newest and most expensive electronic testing systems. In comparison to other Human Resource (H.R.) functions, recruitment is typically not treated as a priority. However, recruiting the best and brightest employees is essential, providing the potential human capital that will fuel other HR practices and ultimately affect the organization's very effectiveness. Therefore, it is important to consider this practice carefully and develop a clear organizational recruitment strategy.

Employee recruitment reflects the processes by which individuals are encouraged to seek and apply for organizational membership. More formally, recruitment has been defined as encompassing "all organizational practices and decisions that affect either the number or types of individuals that are willing to apply, or to accept, a given vacancy" (Rynes, 1991; p. 429, also Breough, 1992). The goals of recruitment are straightforward - to attract the greatest number and highest quality applicants to an organization. The larger the number and better qualified the applicant group, the more likely an organization can effectively select and retain the right employees for the job. Thus, an effective recruitment strategy is an important component of organizational viability in that the practices and policies comprising recruitment efforts ultimately influence firm profitability and sustainability. Given the importance attached to employee recruitment, a large and relatively complex body of research on this topic has emerged. The purpose of this paper is to briefly review the current state of the recruitment literature and draw upon existing research to provide recommendations for enhancing the Canadian government's ability to recruit the "best and brightest" for employment in public service work. This paper, therefore, is based mostly upon theory and research from Human Resource Management and Industrial and Organizational Psychology, although some current experience from recruiting specialists is also shared.

In the pages that follow, we

- a) briefly review the major theoretical perspectives typically used to inform recruitment research,
- b) discuss the applicant and organizational characteristics influencing recruitment processes,
- c) identify potential recruitment challenges facing organizations today and, finally,
- d) summarize and discuss recommendations based on the theories and research presented.

Theories Informing Applicant Attraction and Recruitment

Organizational recruitment efforts are a critical human resource (HR) function, as mistakenly identifying a poor quality candidate as a potentially desirable employee can set into motion a series of negative consequences for organizations - particularly when one considers the impact of making poor hiring decisions over time. The Attraction-Selection-Attrition framework (Schneider, 1987) and theories of fit (e.g., Kristof, 1996) can be used to explain how recruitment and selection efforts influence subsequent HR practices.

Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA; Schneider, 1987)

In a seminal paper, Schneider (1987) argues that attraction to, selection by, and attrition (e.g., turnover) from organizations results in firms being dominated by employees who share common identities and values. Over time, the theory suggests that there will be restriction of range in the types of people working within any given organization. That is, employees remaining in an organization will likely become more similar rather than diverse as an organizations ages. This restriction of range can be attributed to the fact that people who share similar perspectives and goals will tend to stay with the organization, while those who perceive themselves as being dissimilar will likely leave or be terminated. Over time, the model predicts that attrition or turnover of individuals with dissimilar perspectives, skills, and goals from the organization's norm will result in an organization becoming ingrown and occupying an increasingly narrow business focus. In this sense, ASA provides unique insight into understanding the origins and perpetuation of organizational culture.

The framework is novel in that it proposes individuals are not randomly attracted to organizations but rather are attracted to organizations that are "like them" in terms of values, interests, etc. Furthermore, the theory suggests that it is the people, not the environment that shapes organizations. From a practical standpoint, the ASA model suggests that organizations, including the Civil Service, must be cognizant of their recruitment efforts, the organizational image and values they are portraying to applicants, and consciously counteract the tendency to hire an overly homogeneous population. In

other words, The Civil Service may not only need to monitor and change the perspective recruits have of the organization and job, but also be careful to monitor whether their image is narrowing the type of applicant that tends to be attracted to apply for a position.

Person-Organization Fit (PO-Fit; Kristof, 1996)

Similar to the ASA model described above, research on “fit” suggests that a high degree of compatibility between individuals and the organizations they work for predicts a variety of positive outcomes including (e.g., job satisfaction, performance, engagement in prosocial behaviors, and decreased turnover intentions, see Kristof, 1996). The literature highlights several indices by which fit can be defined and measured. In general, “fit” tends to occur when (1) at least one entity provides what the other needs (e.g., the organization provides the challenge and motivation the employee seeks to feel fulfilled), (2) the entities share similar fundamental characteristics (e.g., the organization embodies values also important to the employee) or 3) both (Kristof, 1996, p. 4-5).

In terms of its’ implications for recruitment, research suggests that organizations may take two different approaches to enhancing fit. First, organizations may choose to recruit people who possess knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) that are similar to those that already exist in the work environment. Using this strategy, an organization may be described as trying to supplement existing strengths of the work environment (i.e., pursuing supplementary fit). It is also possible, however, for an organization to recruit in an effort to make the organization “complete” by seeking individuals who possess KSAs that are missing or not already represented (i.e., pursuing complementary fit) (see Kristof, 1996).

Summary

Considered together, ASA and models of fit suggest that organizational recruitment efforts should try to maximize compatibility between individual desires and organizational needs. Even just enhancing perceptions of fit may improve an organization’s ability to attract top-quality applicants. In one study, for example, applicant perceptions of fit were an important determinant of actual job choice (Cable & Judge, 1996). Perceived organizational fit has also been noted to be a more important determinant of actual job choice than perceived fit with more proximal targets (e.g., with one’s job or work-group) (Rynes & Cable, 2003). Although maximizing fit may increase job application and acceptance rates, it is important to note that the benefits associated with enhancing fit could be expected to reflect an inverted U, where too little or too much fit may be detrimental to organizational functioning. A lack of fit among organizational members may result in a chaotic work environment (e.g., it may hinder employees’ ability to develop a shared mental model or work-related schema) while too much may foster institutional inertia and stifle creativity.

Factors Influencing Recruitment Outcomes / Success

The previous section of this paper briefly reviewed some theory guiding much of the scientific approach to understanding recruitment processes and outcomes. This section of

the paper will take a more practical approach to examining how recruitment is assessed, as well as factors likely to impact its success.

At the most basic level, the effectiveness of an organization's recruitment strategies may be evaluated according to the number of applicants that ultimately accept offers of employment (i.e., actual *job choice*). Nevertheless, definitions of recruitment success are multifaceted (see Chapman et al., 2005) and might include asking individuals to report upon one or several of the following: a) their intentions to pursue employment versus remain in the larger applicant pool (Rynes, 1991), b) their global evaluations of job and organizational attractiveness and c) their intentions to accept a position, should one be offered to them. Thus, while increasing rates of actual job choice is important, it is important to remember that the success of any recruitment strategy is multiply determined (i.e., that actual job choice is influenced by each of the factors described above).

Multiple determinants have been noted to influence applicants' levels of attraction to an organization. These include: job (e.g., pay, perquisites), organizational (e.g., image, familiarity), recruiter (e.g., age, personality), and process (e.g., formality) related variables. Although not explicitly discussed in this review, the number of desirable employment alternatives a candidate has, along with expectancies for actually receiving a job offer have also received some attention. Some of these factors will be described in more detail below.

Organizational Characteristics

As noted previously, applicant perceptions of their ability to "fit" with an organization is, in many ways, a more important predictor of individual behavior than perceived fit with one's job or work group. In this sense, "many applicants are at least as concerned about picking the right organization as about choosing the right job" (Rynes & Cable, 2003, p. 56). In their initial consideration of fit, individuals often conduct a global assessment of organizational characteristics (e.g., Barber & Roehling, 1993). Literature suggests that individuals are attracted to firms that are perceived as sharing values similar to their own. In general, people want to work for organizations that uphold principles of fairness, are socially responsible, and promote individual and group achievement (Judge & Bretz, 1992). What sources of information do applicants use to evaluate organizational values? Drawing on existing literature, Rynes and Cable (2003) describe that applicants often estimate fit in light of a) firm reputation, b) personal feelings toward company products, c) opportunities for personal development, d) evaluations regarding the status accorded to similar individuals, d) geographic location and e) visibility in the popular press.

Many of these sources of information described above also reflect the organization's corporate image. Corporate image is among the most important determinants of organizational attractiveness and, in turn, often influences whether or not an individual will actually apply for vacant positions. Research demonstrates that people are willing to take less pay if a potential employer has a positive reputation (Rynes, 1991; Rynes & Cable, 2003). The importance applicants attach to organizational image has been attributed to the social / psychological implications associated with group membership. First, corporate

image carries with it a significant signal function – it seems reasonable to assume that organizations with positive reputations actually deserve those reputations and in this sense, image serves as a signal or proxy for other desirable characteristics. For example, earning a ranking in Fortune magazine’s list of the “best places to work” implies to readers that those companies offer a variety of desirable employment conditions and benefits. In addition to its’ signal function, corporate image matters to the extent that membership in a well-known and/or prestigious organization may enhance individual self-esteem and personal identity.

Corporate image is comprised of several factors, the most important of which include a) applicant familiarity, b) firm profitability and c) the industry in which an organization operates (Rynes & Cable, 2003). Although it may be difficult for a firm to directly influence profits or change industries, steps can be taken to enhance visibility and applicant familiarity. According to Rynes and Cable (2003), the easiest way to improve applicant familiarity is by way of providing more information to applicants. Organizations may achieve this through any number of strategies including, but not limited to, posting employment ads and producing product commercials. Evidence also suggests that including persuasive content in formal organization recruitment materials - in the form of statistical support for organizational claims (e.g., “a recent employee poll shows X% of employee agree that the company values individual achievement”) – increases the attractiveness of organizations as compared to the provision of anecdotal support (e.g., “last year, my group outperformed all others and each of us were given raises.”) (Highhouse, Hoffman, Greve & Collins, 2002). In fact, some evidence suggests that including employee testimonials in formal materials without providing concrete evidence to support such claims may be detrimental to recruitment efforts (Highhouse et al. 2002).

Characteristics of Recruitment Practices

Recruiters and interviewers. After job and organizational characteristics, impressions of organizational recruiters have been found to be the second most important source of fit-related information (Rynes & Cable, 2003). Recruiters’ personality and other characteristics (e.g., display of positive emotions, enthusiasm for the position and company) seem to inform applicants’ initial perceptions of organizations. The ability of recruiters to influence applicants’ actual job choice is somewhat short-lived, however. Recruiter characteristics seem to play little role in applicants’ decision-making beyond the interview phase (e.g., Taylor & Bergman, 1987). Nevertheless, the role recruiter’s play in the selection process should not be ignored, particularly in light of evidence that recruiters may be a source of perceived *misfit* (i.e., favorable initial perceptions of fit may be revised after meeting with organizational recruiters; Rynes & Cable, 2003).

Recruitment vs. selection focus. In terms of recruiter behaviors, organizations may find it beneficial to provide training to those individuals responsible for attracting and recruiting individuals. Training has been found to contribute to process efficiency in that trained recruiters spend more time on task related topics, are better at adhering to an established

recruitment script, and tend to be more effective in asking critical screening or selection-oriented questions (Rynes & Cable, 2003). From the applicants' perspective, trained recruiters are viewed as more organized and as being more interpersonally and technically proficient than their untrained counterparts (Connerley, 1997). Interestingly however, overly proficient recruiters may give the impression of being primarily selection focused which may be intimidating to applicants and contribute to their withdrawal from the application process (Rynes & Cable, 2003). These observations suggest recruiters should strive to strike a balance between adhering to a recruitment script and deviating from it (e.g., taking the time to establish rapport, address applicant questions).

Recruitment Sources

Applicants can be recruited through a variety of sources: newspaper advertisements, websites, recruitment agencies, college recruitment, employee referrals etc. Often, recruitment source vary significantly in terms of their formality, a factor that has been linked to applicant perceptions and that is discussed in more detail, below.

Formal vs. informal

In their comprehensive review of the literature, Rynes and Cable (2003) note that applicants rely on many sources when seeking organization and job-related information. Interestingly, work exists to suggest that some applicants are more likely to be attracted to organizations through formal, rather than informal sources. For instance, females and minority group members are disproportionately likely to seek employment through formal organizational channels while white males are more likely to rely on personal networks or referrals (Rynes & Cable, 2003). This is an important observation - while some evidence suggests individuals recruited through personal contacts or referrals may be less likely to quit (due to possessing a more realistic preview of the job, etc), such practice may negatively affect applicants' perceived fairness of existing recruitment practices (e.g., Gilliland, 1993).

The implications of recruitment source (i.e., formal versus informal) in predicting applicant quality are highly variable and therefore findings from this literature are largely inconclusive. While some research suggests individuals recruited through informal sources are more likely to remain in an organization longer than those recruited through more formal means (Kirnan et al., 1989), other studies find no relationship (Werbel & Landau, 1996; Williams et al., 1993). The implications of recruitment source for employee performance are equally perplexing (i.e., individuals can perform well or poorly regardless of recruitment source). Altogether, this research suggests that the Civil Service would benefit from a variety of recruitment methods, including both formal and informal sources.

Recruitment Policies and Processes

Time-related delays. In addition to considering the channels through which individuals are hired and the implications for applicants' perceived fairness, it is important for recruitment

processes to proceed in an expedient fashion. Recruiting delays contribute to applicant withdrawal (Rynes & Cable, 2003). Of course, those who are likely to withdraw are typically those with the most options (in other words, the best candidates). Recruitment delays influence perceptions of organizational inefficiency and to the extent that recruitment practices are perceived as reflecting more global organizational characteristics, delays may contribute to beliefs that an organization is bogged down by its' own institutional inertia / bureaucracy.

Realistic job previews (RJPs) and expectation lowering procedures (ELPs). Early recruitment research emphasized the value of providing applicants with a realistic assessment of organizational life. Recommendations supporting the use of this practice stemmed from evidence that recruiters tend to over-emphasize the positive attributes of organizations and jobs during their initial "courting" of applicants. Over-emphasizing positive job and organizational attributes may contribute to unrealistic expectations on the part of applicants and dissatisfaction upon not having such expectations met (i.e., learning the true realities of organizational membership). Although some research has found that highly qualified applicants may be somewhat more likely to withdraw from the application process upon learning "realistic" organizational info, the majority of work on RJPs suggests providing a balanced view of a job does not adversely impact applicants' attitudes or behaviors. For example, relationships between realistic job previews and a series of work-related dependent variables (e.g., turnover, job satisfaction, commitment, performance) have been statistically estimated as being close to zero (see Phillips, 1998).

Characteristics of Jobs

Compensation. Not surprisingly, individuals prefer high (as compared to low) paying jobs and respond more favorably to individual merit-based pay (as compared to team-based compensation) (Cable & Judge, 2003). Individuals also tend to be more attracted to jobs that offer fixed pay and flexible (or "cafeteria style") benefits (Cable & Judge, 1994). The best job candidates also value organizations where they perceive having opportunities for personal growth (e.g., job rotation, cross-functional and complex career paths). Nevertheless, the type of compensation that is preferred by employees can vary in accordance with certain individual characteristics. For example, existing work suggests that academically-oriented applicants value interesting and challenging work while socially adept candidates (e.g., strong leaders) tend to value extrinsic rewards (Trank, Rynes & Bretz, 2002). Thus, it may be that tailoring the recruitment script to highlight different benefits could be useful depending upon the nature of the position and the qualities needed by the individual filling it.

Recent evidence also suggests that individuals may assign differential levels of importance to various job characteristics depending upon their personal circumstances. In one study, for example, women were found to weigh job-related information (e.g., location) more heavily than men (Chapman et al., 2005). Chapman et al (2005) also found some evidence

to suggest that male applicants weigh fairness related information more heavily than female applicants when evaluating jobs and organizational attractiveness.

Recruitment Challenges Facing Organizations Today

Employee Entitlement

The new generation of millennial worker has been described as possessing a sense of entitlement that is “off the charts” (Toronto Star, June 9, 2007). Young employees have been described as possessing unreasonably high expectations for compensation, perks and work-related responsibilities (Irvine, 2005). Recruiters have also described having to entice young applicants with job responsibilities and benefits that have traditionally been accessible to those at only the highest levels of the organizational hierarchy (e.g., promises of international assignments, job rotation, etc; Rushowsky, 2007). Indeed, some management scholars have described significant shifts in the psychological contract between employers and employees, noting that employees are increasingly negotiating special work-arrangements, expecting (objectively) unrealistic perks, and exhibiting low levels of job satisfaction and commitment. It would therefore seem that employers may have to modify traditional recruitment activities in an effort to appeal to employees from the “meGeneration” (Twenge, 2006).

Shifting Labor Pool Demographics and the Changing Nature of Work

An aging workforce, coupled with declining birth rates and low unemployment rates, suggest Canadian employers may soon face labor pool shortages. The workforce is rapidly aging – some have estimated that the average age of today’s workforce is 41 - up 7 years from 1980 - and that many workers will be eligible for retirement in coming years (O’Leary et al., 200). Thus, organizations may increasingly find themselves having to recruit from diverse sources and offer non-traditional work arrangements. Recently, much attention has been given to the under-utilization / under-representation of skilled immigrant workers in the Canadian workplace. Recruiting immigrant workers may be one strategy by which Canadian employers can address impending labor shortages. Organizations may also find it beneficial to modify their work arrangements to attract non-traditional (e.g., contingent) employees. For example, offering greater flexibility in terms of when and where work is completed may not only increase the applicant pool, but signal to applicants that the company offers progressive HR practices.

Proliferation of Recruitment Technologies

Websites have become an important component of the recruitment process. In fact, electronic media often serve as the “primary vehicle by which job applicants initially gather information about the attributes of organizations, learn about job openings, and submit employment applications” (Williamson, Lepak & King, 2003). With regard to providing

recruitment information via organizational websites, research suggests that recruitment-oriented (i.e., “selling” the organization), rather than screening-oriented (i.e., “collecting” applicant information) websites enhance organizational attractiveness (Williamson et al., 2003; also Cober et al., 2003). In addition to influencing applicants’ initial job search and information gathering, technology is also beginning to transform the interview process. Preliminary evidence addressing reactions to technologically-mediated interviews show that (traditional) face-to-face interviews are rated as resulting in more positive applicant reactions – including perceived fairness and job acceptance intentions - than telephone or videoconference interviews (Chapman, Uggerslev & Webster, 2003). Although integrating technology into the recruitment process may be viewed favorably by some applicants (particularly technologically savvy individuals), over-reliance on such strategies may remove some of the interpersonal components of the recruitment process by which individuals evaluate fit.

Recommendations for Recruiting for the Canadian Civil Service

The sections above discussed some theory and research on recruitment as well as the challenges facing recruitment today with particular interest to challenges facing recruitment for civil service positions. Based on this brief review of the recruitment literature, a number of recommendations for recruitment practice are made below:

1 Ground recruitment in organization-related requirements. All recruitment and selection decisions should be based on a sound understanding of the needs of the job and the current organizational structure. In other words, the public service should know what it is recruiting for. What is the target applicant profile in terms of knowledge, skills, and abilities? Who is likely to fit in, or provide diversity if that is what is needed? More importantly, which sets of skills and abilities are most important relative to others?

2 Gain the support of management in offering specific jobs. According to Cluffs and Associates, “It is far easier to capture a candidate’s interest with a real, specific job than it is to promise further consideration if and when a suitable job becomes available.”² No matter how attracted they may be to an organization, applicants will want to know more about the position they will have and the people they will be working with.

3 Make career options in the civil service more visible to Canadians. This could include more advertising in a variety of mediums, or career counseling programs at the high school and university levels. Whatever the medium, it should start young: reaching people earlier in their career search tends to result in a more committed applicant pool.

4 Disseminate “product” advertisements. Marketing can make all the difference. The government’s public service advertisements could showcase the diversity of its business and policy concerns. Such “product” advertisements could make the public service appear less rule-bound and more avant-garde to potential applicants.³ To the degree that some may view government work as inflexible and excessively bureaucratic, this approach may be effective in combating these negative perceptions.

5 Invest in modernizing the image and practice of human resources management. High-performance work systems like comprehensive recruitment and selection methods or training and development methods can reduce employee turnover and enhance individual and organizational productivity.⁴

6 Support claims with evidence. According to Highhouse et. al. (2002), “prospective applications seem to prefer evidence that is more representative and verifiable when it comes from the company’s promotional materials, but seem to be influenced

² Cluffs and Associates, 2001.

³ Rynes, and Cable, 2003. P55-76.

⁴ Huselid, 1995. P635-672.

considerably more by anecdotal information when it is communicated by outside sources.”⁵ Claims supported with evidence and anecdotes from current employees are more likely to make an impact, especially if that evidence is factual, like the results of an employee survey. Furthermore, it is important to convey what an organization is actually like—not just what employees want to hear. One Australian survey found that as many as 30% of employees would resign if a company did not live up to what was promised during recruitment.⁶

7 Provide training to recruiters. Recruiting is often done by untrained, low-level or recently hired members of an organization.⁷ These individuals are not likely to have the vision, training, or experiential background needed to make important recruitment decisions. Recruiters who appear well-versed in organizational matters and conduct themselves professionally trigger positive applicant responses. Furthermore, recruitment interviews should be standardized and structured for fairness, with interviewees given the same background information and asked similar questions.

8 Balance recruitment (selling) and selection (screening) during the hiring process. Public service recruiters should not dismiss employees who ask for high salaries in favour of settling for someone less qualified. Although recruitment and selection are often a negotiation, salary expectations should not come up until candidates are able to reveal more about their qualifications.

9 Open jobs at all levels to external candidates—and not just symbolically. While internal recruitment and promotion has many benefits, over-reliance on such a practice can be detrimental. It can reduce the transparency and therefore the perceived legitimacy of recruitment procedures, and can also dissuade otherwise well-qualified candidates from applying. Too much internal promotion can create what Schneider calls “homosocial reproduction,” whereby the same ideas, procedures, and people are constantly recycled through the organization—creating stagnation, decreased innovation, and productivity loss.⁸

10 Vary the sources through which employees are attracted to the organization. Hiring new employees through both the recommendations of strong current employees and through more formal recruitment channels can help diversify and strengthen the workforce. To the extent that ‘A’ players attract other ‘A’ players, high-performing employees may be disproportionately likely to recommend other high performers.⁹

⁵ Highhouse, Greve, Collins, 2002. P1751.

⁶ Hays Specialist Recruitment Consultancies, 2007. <http://www.hays.com.au/common/pages/news/newsdesc.aspx?id=149>

⁷ Cluffs and Associates, 2001.

⁸ Schneider, 1987. P437-453.

⁹ Pfeffer, and Sutton, 2006.

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Maximize the primacy effect—reduce interview-job offer lag times. The lag time between the recruitment, application, interview, and hiring phases of the process can carry negative connotations—enough so to perhaps force some of the better candidates to seek employment elsewhere.¹⁰ By striving to make the hiring process a quick one, some organizations may be able to lure top-quality candidates away from objectively more desirable—yet perhaps less responsive—organizations.

Be realistic (but not too realistic). Although it has been demonstrated that providing realistic information has little negative effect on individual attitudes and behaviors, failing to provide such information may be particularly counterproductive. Balancing the nature of information provided to applicants could serve to prevent unexpected negative surprises in the post-hire phase.

Highlight the intangible benefits of work. Many, if not most, public service jobs cannot compete with the private sector in terms of salary and benefits. Thus, it is important during the attraction and recruitment phase that the intangible perks—like pensions, holidays, cross-training, and job security—of such jobs are made salient to applicants. Emphasizing job features like work-life balance, task and skill variety, autonomy, and task significance could be particularly effective towards this end.

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, a review of the current recruitment literature was provided, with particular emphasis given to the organizational, interpersonal, and structural / procedural factors influencing recruitment outcomes. In addition, a series of recommendations for practice were proposed on the basis of this review. Although recruitment is a vital component of a successful HRM strategy, it is only part of maintaining a productive workforce. Equal care should be given to issues surrounding employee retention and ensuring that the benefits associated with effective recruitment practices realize long-term gains (i.e., that top-quality applicants actually maintain their organizational membership). That is, efforts should be made to ensure that once recruited and hired, top candidates remain with the public service, motivated by opportunities to grow and make a difference to Canada.

¹⁰ Cluffs and Associates, 2001.

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