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Get innovative in personnel selection: The case of the port of Antwerp

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Belgium

Get Innovative in Personnel Selection: The Case of the Port of Antwerp

Filip Lievens, Britt De Soete and Christoph Nils Herde

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Organizational Setting

Thanks to its central location and its large storage and distribution capacity, the Port of Antwerp can be regarded as a key gateway to Europe. Concerning international maritime transport, Antwerp is ranked as the second harbor of Europe and the seventh harbor worldwide. The Port of Antwerp is the European market leader in terms of the transportation of steel, fruit, forest products, coffee, tobacco, and other products. In 2009, it dealt with almost 160 million tons of goods. Each year, over 14,000 sea-going vessels and 55,000 inland navigation vessels are passing through the Port of Antwerp. As nearly every important European consumption and production center can be reached easily by train, vessel or truck from the Port of Antwerp, it is considered to be a crucial player in the international trade business. Over the centuries, the Port area has grown to exactly 13,057 hectares, or about 20,000 soccer fields.

Each day, about 150,000 people contribute to the operation of the Port of Antwerp. This includes lorry drivers, ships' agents, and customs officials. The majority of these people work for private organizations in and around the port area. In addition, there is the Antwerp Port Authority. As an organization, the Antwerp Port Authority numbers about 1,650 employees who play an important role in the day-to-day operation of the port (e.g., managing and maintaining docks, bridges, locks, quay walls, and land; efficient passage and safety of the shipping traffic).¹

Since the first Belgian social laws were voted in 1887, there has existed a growing necessity for Antwerp harbor employers as well as employees to gather in occupational associations to facilitate the social bargaining process. The harbor employees joined trade unions who acted on their members' behalf during collective bargaining and social conflicts. Nowadays, every blue-collar harbor worker in the Port of Antwerp is obliged to become a union member because the trade unions not only represent their members in the social debate but also organize the sequence in which all applicants can participate in the port's selection process. The trade unions also provide each selected blue-collar harbor worker with a registration card which gives the owner the official right to perform harbor labor.

In a similar vein, the employers of the Port of Antwerp joined an employers' federation: CEPA (Center of Employers at the Port of Antwerp), which was founded on March 22, 1929. CEPA's main purpose was to optimize the organization of the harbor labor. Each employer in the Port was obliged to become a CEPA member and to pay a yearly contribution to the organization. In turn, CEPA provided its members with, among other things, a social administration service, a medical service organization, a training center, and a compensation fund. This fund was intended to pay the wages of the blue-collar workers in case of economic or technical unemployment. Until now, the responsibilities of CEPA have been threefold. Most importantly, CEPA represents all harbor employers during the social bargaining process with the trade unions and during social conflicts. Second, CEPA is held responsible for the organization and administration concerning the selection and wage payment of all 9,300 Antwerp blue-collar dock workers. The third task of CEPA as an umbrella organization is the daily management of the above-mentioned service organizations and organisms.

HRM in Belgium: A Culture of Compromise

As the Belgian culture is an essential determinant of the HRM processes in Belgium, it is important to describe the broader cultural context (Sels, Janssens, Van Den Brande, & Overlaet, 2000). However, answering this question is not simple, as a united Belgian culture is almost nonexistent. King Albert I found himself confronted with the same observation in 1911 when one of his senators noted: 'Sire, il n'y pas de Belges!' ('Sire, there are no Belgians!' [Sels et al., 2000, p. 21]). Rather than by uniformity, the country is characterized by numerous contrasts. Examples are ideological (Catholic versus liberal), linguistic (French versus Flemish) and economic (labor versus capital) discrepancies. Box 2.1 presents more facts and figures about the economic, political, demographic, and educational context of Belgium.

These opposites, together with the shared Belgian history – rather than the shared Belgian culture – have molded the current relationships between employers and employees. The Catholic influences, and Belgium's pioneer contribution to the second industrial revolution and its inherent social conflicts, have substantially influenced the formal employment agreement and the psychological contract between employers and employees. Individual employment agreements are considered as membership certificates with limited room for negotiation. Therefore, most Belgian employees – especially blue-collar workers – have joined trade unions and changes in employment conditions have been realized by collective bargaining. The long Belgian tradition of social negotiation and collective bargaining was created and is currently fostered by the psychological contract between employers and employees and the accompanying cultural values.

Nowadays, Belgian psychological contracts are characterized by high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, and, as a consequence, also high loyalty and low exit intentions (Hofstede, 1980). In practice, this implies that Belgian employees highly respect their employer's authority (power distance). However, as a return, they count on their supervisors to meet their expectations, which primarily deal with labor conditions and job security (uncertainty avoidance) and which are subject to collective bargaining. As both employers and employees place great value on the continuity of the production process, job security, social peace, and good-quality long-term relationships, they constantly strive to reach a compromise during the negotiations. As the aforementioned Belgian contrasts have continuously threatened

harmony and social peace, the Belgian culture of compromise and consensualism became a strategy to survive – also in the domain of HRM. Therefore, addressing and informing unions, inviting them as a partner in the collective bargaining process, and maintaining good union relationships are inherent parts of the management tasks of Belgian employers.

Box 2.1. Facts and Figures about Belgium

Belgium is a federal state that is governed by a representative democratic, constitutional monarchy. Whereas the royal dynasty represents the Head of State, the Prime Minister serves as head of government. Regarding the separation of powers, the government acts as the executive power, whereas the parliament acts as well as the legislative power (Belgian Federal Government, 2016). Belgium's population size amounts to 11,209,044, which represents 2.2% of the overall population of the European Union. 61.6% of all Belgian residents are between 18 and 64 years old. Similar to many European countries, Belgian society faces an increasing senescence (the 18.1% of people who are 65 or older). 11.2% of all Belgian residents held a foreign nationality in 2015 (Algemene Directie Statistiek - Statistics Belgium, 2015).

Belgium comprises geographical regions that represent different communities with distinct languages, slight cultural divergences, and even unique governments. In 2015, 57.5% percent lived in the Dutch speaking part (Flanders), 10.5% lived in the French as well as Dutch speaking region of Brussels, 31.3% lived in the French speaking part (Wallonia), and finally, 0.7% lived in the German speaking region/community (Algemene Directie Statistiek - Statistics Belgium, 2015; Belgian Federal Government, 2016). Altogether, these different communities generate a Gross Domestic Product of 400.6 billion €, which represents 2.9% of the Gross Domestic Product of the European Union. With a share of 69% in 2014, the service sector represents the most important contributor to the overall Gross Domestic Product in Belgium. Within the service sector, trade, transport & catering, government & education, as well as business services are the three leading branches of industry (Algemene Directie Statistiek - Statistics Belgium, 2015).

Regarding the level of education, 29.3% successfully achieved a university diploma, a college diploma or a comparable degree. The percentage of Belgians between 30 and 34 years old with such a higher educational degree was 43.8% in 2014, which is above the average of countries in the European Union (Algemene Directie Statistiek - Statistics Belgium, 2015).

The above-average educational level in Belgium also contributes to its high level of human development. That is, the Human Development Index (HDI), which is based on the dimensions of (1) the ability to lead a long and healthy life, (2) the ability to acquire knowledge, and (3) the ability to achieve a decent standard of living, equals 0.890, which makes Belgium rank 21 in the world. So, Belgium's HDI indicates very high human development (United Nations Development Programme, 2015).

The Port of Antwerp: Towards an Innovative Selection Approach

Problems and Challenges in the Port

From the 1990s until October 2004, CEPA outsourced the whole selection process for blue-collar harbor workers to a government-owned selection company. External consultants

were responsible for the acquisition of the test battery, which consisted of an interview and numerous paper-and-pencil tests. The selection tests were rather old-fashioned and no feedback reports were provided to the candidates. Twice a week, Tom Wolters, one of the consultants, visited the Port of Antwerp to communicate his decisions about the applicants and to provide face-to-face feedback when the candidates explicitly requested it.

In light of this state of affairs, both the candidates applying for a job in the Port of Antwerp and the associated unions displayed an extremely negative attitude towards the selection procedure as it was organized in those days. The main critique expressed dealt with its troublesome job-relatedness, namely its perceived lack of a connection between the content and format of the selection methods used on the one hand and the target job on the other hand. This lack of a conceptual link between the test battery and the job led to reduced motivation on the part of the applicants because they perceived the result of the process as merely arbitrary instead of being based on a thorough assessment of their abilities. As the test battery was perceived to be an invalid predictor of job performance, the selection decision was also often challenged by candidates. Frequently, Tom had to deal with complex and emotional feedback conversations with rejected candidates, who received the full support of the trade unions, whereby union representatives often attended the feedback meetings and criticized the entire selection process. At that point, any glimmer of constructiveness and effectiveness in the selection and feedback process of the Antwerp blue-collar harbor workers was in the distant future . . .

In 2004, Sophie Ryan joined CEPA as the new head of the selection department of the blue-collar harbor workers. In the past, she had worked as a consultant in the domain of personnel selection, which had made her aware of the importance of standardized, up-to-date, and valid selection procedures. Sophie's assessment of the selection situation at the Port of Antwerp revealed that CEPA was faced with multiple challenges. First, as the selection battery was questioned and criticized by applicants, harbor workers, and unions, the reputation of the CEPA selection procedure was in jeopardy. Second, the low motivation of the applicants often led to a decline in their test performance. The feedback meetings subsequent to the testing procedure were frustrating both for CEPA – which could not explain why certain candidates were not shortlisted for the job as blue-collar dock workers – and for the candidates – who did not consider their testing results as a sufficient explanation for their rejection. The traditional selection procedure also caused the relationship between the harbor and the union to deteriorate. As the trade unions fundamentally disagreed on the use of the test battery, they displayed a rather inflexible attitude during numerous negotiations with the CEPA management, which slowed down the social bargaining process and complicated it significantly. Another difficulty inherent in the old selection procedure was that the test did not meet the changing nature of the job. In fact, the job demands had modified and increased over the years as a result of the changing legal and technological environment. Last but not least, Sophie noticed that the current selection process was too stringent and demanding so that remaining vacancies were not filled. As the different selection instruments required a high level of literacy and language understanding (even though that was not needed for the job), many applicants were wrongfully rejected. Especially members of non-traditional applicant (minority) groups faced difficulties in being selected as dock workers because of the high reading and writing demands of the test battery, irrespective of their technical skills. Thus, members of the minority applicant pool had significantly fewer chances to be selected than members of a majority applicant pool (Zedeck, 2010). This adverse impact not only raised ethical, deontological, and legal questions, but also led to practical

organizational problems such as the aforementioned shortfalls in applicant pools. This was especially important in times of increasing labor shortages on the one hand and growing globalization and international mobility of employers and employees on the other hand.

In short, Sophie concluded that the Port of Antwerp in general and CEPA in particular were challenged to develop a new, job-related, and transparent selection test battery. First, the selection procedure had to predict the performance of the blue-collar harbor workers, while taking the current job demands into account. Second, it was supposed to elicit positive perceptions among applicants and trade unions, which in turn should improve the image of the Port and its relationships with the union. Third, it had to be an appealing selection procedure for traditional (majority) as well as non-traditional (minority) applicant groups.

The Switch

After careful consideration of the possible options, the chairman of the division, Sophie and her staff decided to transform the current test battery entirely in order to meet the above-mentioned challenges. The development of a novel selection test battery consisted of numerous steps. First, an extensive job analysis was conducted to determine the KSAOs (knowledge, skills, abilities and other competencies) of each blue-collar employee profile. Therefore, interviews were undertaken with the head and the trainers of the training center, co-workers from the prevention and protection department, and trade union representatives. These job analyses resulted in an adaptation of the existing job profiles to the current needs of the harbor and a list of corresponding KSAOs per profile. The next step consisted of determining which selection procedures should be included in the selection process based on the KSAOs to be assessed. CEPA's aim was to shift from traditional test methods to a new test battery that consisted of computer-based tests and simulation exercises. To compose the selection battery, computerized tests used by other maritime organizations were purchased and supplemented with tailor-made computer exercises developed by an external consultancy firm. The former consisted of a 187-item personality questionnaire, an abstract cognitive reasoning test, and a speed-and-accuracy test. All exercises developed by the external consultancy firm used a visual presentation of the test content instead of a written presentation. Some exercises could be defined as simulation exercises or sample-based selection instruments as applicants were put in a simulated work situation and expected to realistically perform job-related tasks and solve problems.

Although most blue-collar dock workers went through the same selection process, attention was also paid to the development of specific selection instruments for specific harbor worker profiles. The crane operator test, a simulation exercise that was developed to test applicants for the job of crane operator, serves as a good example. During this exercise, the candidate is placed in a simulated container crane on a harbor terminal and is subsequently asked to unload an inland navigation vessel. To do so, each candidate has a computer screen and two joysticks at his disposal, which serve to present the simulated situation and to carry out the accompanying tasks respectively. There are two tasks: first of all, the candidate needs to reach out for the container and afterwards he is expected to place the container on the dock. While performing this latter task, it is important that the applicant takes the position of other harbor container transporters into account and does not obstruct them in their movement. Figure 2.1 presents the reader with a screenshot of the crane operator test. The crane operator test measures four different KSAOs: concentration ability (speed-and-accuracy),

sense of responsibility, sense of safety, and stress resilience. An important asset of this computer test is its ability to assess these KSAOs in an objective way. By using an automated scoring key which was developed in advance, the subjective element in the assessment process was reduced. Concentration ability was measured by the speed by which a candidate was able to work with the spreader (i.e., container lifting device). The hindering of other vehicles in the harbor served as a proxy for the candidate's sense of responsibility. The applicant's sense of safety was determined by the number of safety mistakes displayed during the test, for example, colliding with containers, ships or other transport vehicles. Finally, stress resilience was measured by the candidate's performance during test situations with increasing demands (e.g., via the manipulation of time limits). Since 2005, the crane operator test has been successfully used in the selection process of Antwerp crane operators.

An important aspect that Sophie took into account while modifying the selection process was improving and maintaining good long-term relationships between CEPA and the trade unions. In order to develop a personal connection with the trade unions and to lower the communication threshold, Sophie decided to introduce herself personally to all harbor union representatives shortly after she joined CEPA. To gain union commitment, Sophie presented the plans to adapt the CEPA selection system and discussed them with the unions already in the earliest stages of the switch. As mentioned earlier, the trade unions participated to develop the new job profiles of blue-collar harbor workers. Although the unions were strong advocates of changing the traditional testing method, the development of a new test battery also induced a new perceived threat to a fair selection process. As Sophie found out during her conversations with union representatives, they feared that the PC-based

nature of the battery required applicants to possess more computer skills than needed for performing blue-collar worker jobs. Especially older job applicants feared they would not be able to perform the tests properly and be selected out. Both Sophie and the external consultancy firm took this feedback into account when developing the new selection battery. It was ensured that neither computer skills nor a specialized educational background was required to complete the selection instruments. Finally, to familiarize the unions with the new test battery, trade union representatives were invited to pretest the new computerized selection instruments.

In the end, not only the selection battery but also the accompanying feedback process was thoroughly adapted. As opposed to the early days, from 2004 every applicant has been receiving a feedback report. In addition to this written report, each candidate has been entitled to ask for a face-to-face feedback appointment and has had the opportunity to look into his/her tests. Every rejected candidate also has the right to sign up for a retest at an external selection office selected by CEPA.

The Current Situation at the Port of Antwerp

The switch from the traditional test battery to a modern, job-related, and computerized version implied numerous direct and indirect advantages for the Port of Antwerp. Logical consequences resulting from the computerized selection procedure were faster and more efficient test administration and an up-to-date item banking/norming. Apart from these practical benefits, the use of fancy technological devices in selection also tends to generate positive applicant perceptions (Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004). Taken together, this led to a substantial image improvement of the Port of Antwerp and CEPA in general and its selection process in particular.

One of the most important consequences of the renewed test battery is the development of a job-related selection process for the blue-collar harbor workers. As the test development was based on an extensive job analysis and made use of practical and visual (simulation) exercises, the link between the selection procedures and the job became evident. As researchers have already demonstrated, this job-relatedness or face validity of a selection instrument serves as an important determinant of applicant test motivation and test performance (Chan & Schmitt, 1997; Hausknecht et al., 2004). Accordingly, simultaneously with the switch towards the new selection battery, Sophie noticed an increase in motivation at the applicant level. Hence, CEPA received considerably fewer complaints concerning the selection process. In addition, the feedback meetings went more smoothly as the rejection of candidates could be objectively argued, thereby increasing feedback acceptance. Trade unions also notified the enhanced job-relatedness of the new testing battery and no longer criticized the selection process. This significantly improved the relationships between unions and the harbor management and facilitated the social bargaining process at the Port.

Another benefit of the test battery adaptation was its opportunity to take into account the changing needs at the Port of Antwerp. Due to changes in the legal and technological harbor context, the job of blue-collar harbor worker faced increased demands concerning the KSAOs required. The modernization of the test procedure permitted Sophie and her staff to include these changed job demands when developing the new selection procedure, which resulted in a better assessment of the harbor worker's abilities. This fits with one of the most important goals of the Port of Antwerp, namely ensuring the quality of harbor labor and service.

A last important benefit of the renewed selection process in the Port of Antwerp is its reduced reading and writing demands and enhanced visual presentation of the stimulus

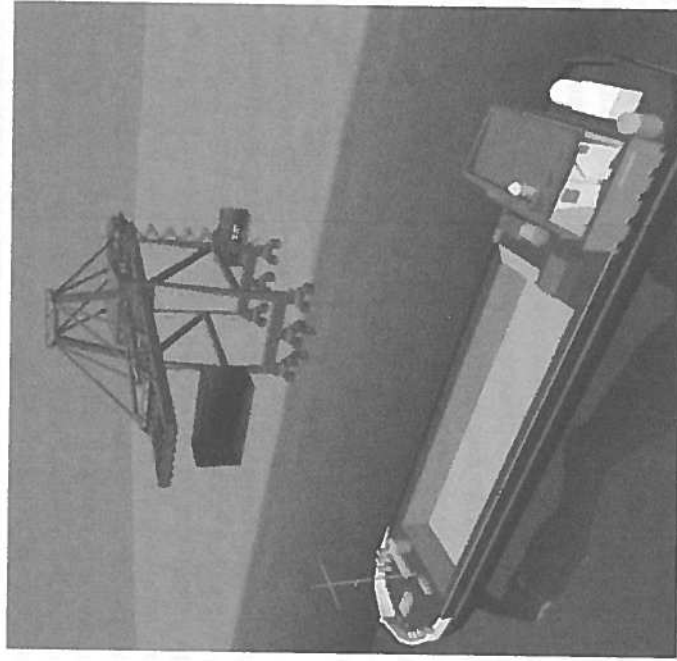


Figure 2.1 Screenshot of computerized crane operator simulation

material. By omitting unnecessary test demands (i.e., test demands that are not related to the job), the Port of Antwerp has nowadays the chance to enlarge its applicant pool by targeting non-traditional applicant groups.

Conclusion

This case exemplifies how HRM has to invest in developing sophisticated and innovative solutions to tackle current selection challenges such as altering applicant perceptions, responding to changing work environments, improving the company image, and making the selection battery attractive for traditional as well as non-traditional applicant pools. The case further exemplifies the growing importance of “gamification” in contemporary selection (Fetzer & Tuzinski, 2014), training (Fetzer, 2015), and recruitment (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). Box 2.2 presents more information on gamification. Finally, this case study demonstrates the importance for HRM of taking its country's cultural background into account while developing and implementing a solution. Accordingly, at the Port of Antwerp, the Belgian history of unionization and its culture of consensualism significantly influenced the process of developing a new selection approach.

Box 2.2 Gamification as a Trend in HRM

The computerized crane operator mirrors several game-like elements, such as the engagement in interactive problem solving, test-takers' possibility of controlling the dynamics within the simulation to a reasonable albeit limited extent, and the availability of explicit feedback regarding test-takers' performance during the simulation (Fetzer, 2015). Recent developments to enrich simulation exercises by implementing game-like features aim to enhance the test-takers' engagement in simulation exercises. It is expected that an increase in engagement is related to a decrease in the awareness of one's KSAOs being assessed (Fetzer, 2015; Shute, Ventura, Bauer, & Zapata-Rivera, 2009). The use of serious games within organizational settings has most recently spread across a variety of different areas of application. Most prominently, serious games have been introduced to serve training purposes (Fetzer, 2015). In addition, organizations have started to take advantage of serious games in recruitment (recruitment games) that intend to attract new applicants and to screen potential applicants at the same time (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). Finally, the use of serious games in personnel selection is also growing (Fetzer, 2015; Ryan & Ployhart, 2014). To the best of our knowledge, however, extensive evaluations of the use of serious games in personnel selection are still lacking (Ryan & Ployhart, 2014). Therefore, in-depth empirical investigations of serious games in personnel selection, especially regarding their validity, adverse impact or applicant perceptions are needed (Fetzer, 2015; Ryan & Ployhart, 2014).

Questions

- 1 In what ways does the Port of Antwerp resemble or differ from your own national port or large organizations? Is the solution presented applicable in your country of origin?
- 2 Compare the Belgian unionization to the tradition of unionization in your own country. What implications does this have for the development of staffing solutions in general and a new selection procedure in particular?

- 3 Do you know of organizations in your country that faced similar problems to those of the Port of Antwerp? How did they solve these problems and what were the outcomes? In what ways did the solutions these organizations proposed differ from the ones adopted by the Port of Antwerp?
- 4 What are the possible drawbacks of this new selection procedure? What are the challenges it might face in the future?

Note

The authors have permission to publish this case study and to make small factual changes. For privacy reasons only fictional names were used.

- 1 More information can be found at <http://www.portofantwerp.com>

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