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Recruitment Communication and Psychological Contracts in Start-Ups: Dark Side Challenges of Selling a Job and Creating Realistic Expectations

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Abstract

Recruitment communication presents a dilemma for organisations. When organisations hire, they often engage in branding themselves as employers (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004) and rely on positive framing to present vacant positions in order to attract candidates. This leads to the ensuing challenge of living up to these promises for the candidates who are ultimately hired. Overpromising and underdelivering leads to a breach of the initial psychological contract. This balancing dilemma is especially pertinent for new and unknown companies, where concerns about the company's legitimacy as an employer may cause potential candidates not to apply (Williamson, Cable, & Aldrich, 2002). On the one hand, start-ups need and want to attract the best, and on the other hand, they need to be wary of the impression they are creating of the job and the organisation as a place of work, as they would also like the candidates to stay once they are hired. I draw on interviews with managers and newcomers in Danish start-ups to give empirical examples of this challenge and its results, using the literature on psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1995) as an explanatory framework. I discuss what organisations might do to accomplish this balancing feat from theoretical and practical perspectives.

Keywords

Recruitment communication, psychological contracts, start-ups, expectations, candidates

1   Introduction

At the 2nd International Conference on Discourse and Communication, the theme was 'The Dark Side of Communication'. In addressing this theme, the present paper takes a slightly different angle than many of the other conference contributions, since this paper is not about 'the dark side' as controlling communication, e.g. for purposes of manipulation, but instead focuses on another 'dark side' of communication, namely the challenges that, by virtue of its complex nature, communication also creates for us.

This work has sprung from my PhD research (Rasmussen, 2019b), focusing on organisational socialisation and knowledge communication in ICT (information and communication technology) start-ups. In the course of conducting

that research, I noticed some patterns in how the managers and the newcomers, respectively, talked about the role of recruitment communication, especially job interviews, in relation to development of expectations and early alignment of these. I have also written a small paper for a Danish HR practitioner magazine on the role of and challenges connected to job interviews in start-ups (Rasmussen, 2019a). For the purposes of the present paper, I draw on both my PhD work, the magazine paper and further extant literature, as the challenges connected to recruitment communication is a topic with room for further enquiry, especially in terms of the difficulties faced by start-ups.

Thus, in this paper, in addressing 'the dark side' of recruitment communication, I focus on the expectations this creates and relate this to subsequent experiences of hired candidates and the (potential) consequences, drawing on the literature on psychological contracts. With a communicative spin on the characterisation of discourse as both constructed and constructive (e.g. Potter, 1996, p. 97-98; Potter, 2004/2009, p. 610), this paper will thus illustrate that we use communication, but communication also uses us.

Having sketched the background for this piece, in the following sections, I develop the problematisation generally and specifically, and position it in relation to 'the dark side of communication'. I then present the literary background, namely recruitment communication and psychological contracts, before introducing my methods, and then highlighting empirical examples and discussing implications and contributions.

1.1   Problematisation

In this section, I outline the problem in detail, including who it is a problem for.

Generally, we can say that companies attract candidates by making promises (as exemplified in employer branding (cf. e.g. the review by Backhaus, 2016), where companies seek to establish themselves as an 'employer of choice', based on a certain employer value proposition), and retain their employees by keeping the promises and living up to expectations (and perhaps exceeding them). I.e. recruitment communication creates promises to candidates, and they begin to develop expectations in relation to these. Hired candidates, new employees that is, will then expect these promises to be fulfilled.

Thus, recruitment communication, or persuasion, needs to be balanced against retention.
This suggests understanding these challenges in relation to psychological contracts (Backhaus, 2016; Rousseau, 1995). Advertently or inadvertently painting a too rosy picture in recruitment becomes a problem in encounter, as the promises or expectations might lead to an inexpedient psychological contract. Negative consequences of unmet expectations and broken promises are e.g. poorer performance and turnover/organisational exit (e.g. Louis, 1980).

In a recent survey (Kandidatanalysen 2019) from ballisager (a Danish consultancy focused on recruitment), 19% of respondents answered that they had quit a new job within their first year, among these 33% said that the job was different than what they had initially been presented with (Konsulenthuset ballisager, 2019).

Here I focus on start-ups. Williamson, Cable and Aldrich (2002) mention that small firms, including start-ups, have two challenges when needing to recruit: 1) potential candidates lack knowledge/acquaintance of the company, and 2) legitimacy challenges, i.e. candidates might be concerned about the company's legitimacy as an employer.

However, what I add here is that this is only one part of a double-sided challenge, in that there are recruitment challenges, i.e. attracting and selling the job, but on the other hand, in addressing that challenge, there is also the challenge of creating a standard/promises that can be kept. So the problem is in effect attracting candidates and selling a job, i.e. recruiting, while not making promises that one cannot keep, i.e. finding ways to address the recruitment challenges in a way that is 'sustainable' in relation to retention.

The psychological contract challenges and perceived contract violations that I show in my examples here are mostly, in Rousseau's (1995) terms, 'inadvertent' (i.e. they occur despite the company being able and willing to live up to promises) or due to 'disruption' (meaning that they occur when a company is willing but unable to live up to promises).

1.2   Positioning: Approaching the 'Dark Side' of Recruitment Communication in Start-Ups

The paper addresses 'the dark side of communication' more than 'dark side communication'. I.e. it is less about how people try to communicate/persuade/manipulate with negative intents, and more about the fact that communication can create challenges for us. I do not grapple with 'dark side' as deliberate as such, but more dark side in terms of challenges communication also presents us with, and how it can create problems for us. This awareness also highlights the important role of communication research, communication scholars, and communication professionals in HR, due to the need for understanding and respecting the forces of communication in recruitment and other HR processes.

If we accept Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson's (1969/2017) maxim that 'you cannot not communicate' (as cited in Windahl, Signitzer, & Olson, 2009, p. 112), then this also suggests that communication has a dark side, namely that it can be something we do inadvertently. As I will show here, in relation to recruitment communication and psychological contracts, promises are made through communication, either deliberately, or something in the recruitment

communication is taken up as a promise. I.e., working with a transactional (rather than linear) model of communication (cf. e.g. Windahl et al., 2009), what we deliberately say might not be what others take from a conversation, and, e.g. in a job interview, we may even think that we are 'converging' (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981) on mutual understanding, only to realise when a candidate starts that, despite our best efforts, there are (still) differences in expectations and perceived promises. I include examples of promises made in job interviews or job advertisements that new employees do not perceive as having been kept, i.e. examples where recruitment communication in start-ups has created challenges in relation to expectations.

2   Literature Review

In the following two sections, I first explain what is meant by 'recruitment communication' in this paper, and I then introduce the work on psychological contracts that serves as a framework for understanding the recruitment communication challenges in the empirical material.

2.1   Recruitment Communication

Here, 'recruitment communication' is understood as communication related to attracting and hiring candidates, which involves e.g. the discipline of employer branding, specific activities such as job interviews, and specific texts such as job advertisements, etc.

There is a joke in the HR discipline which exactly touches on the relationship between recruiting candidates and communicating with current employees. I first encountered it in a LinkedIn post from a recruitment professional. The joke tells the tale of a candidate who is lured into a position with golden promises, but once hired, experiences that reality is nothing like what was promised. Confronting the hiring manager with this, the candidate received the following answer from the hiring manager (depicted as the devil in the story) is: 'yesterday we were recruiting you, today you are staff' (B Thomas, 2017).

It is of course a joke, making recruitment communication seem grotesque and manipulative. In today's world with the 'war for talent' and the focus on employer branding and talent attraction, ideally that is not how the balance between recruitment and retention is conceived of, as, in most cases, it would not be a sustainable strategy. And speaking of a related, but (perhaps) more sustainable strategy, employee advocacy (e.g. Walden & Westerman, 2018), i.e. focusing on the authentic endorsement of current employees to attract candidates and boost morale, is currently very 'hot' in HR. The important point for the purposes here is that there is a link, which involves communication skills, in managing the transition from candidate to employee, where initial psychological contracts are put to the test.

Besides obvious manipulation or what we might call dark side recruitment communication, if a new employee leaves, it is a dark side of communication that recruitment communication can be a challenge for the organisation. E.g. the candidate might have perceived something as a promise which was intended more as something potential. These 'dark sides' of recruitment communication, stemming from its challenges, have consequences for both organisations and employees. Recruitment communication sets expectations and creates (perceived) obligations (I go into psychological contracts in the next sections). I.e. recruitment communication creates expectations and promises are made, and this is consequential, whether these promises are offered specifically or taken up as promises. As such, we use communication in recruitment, but it also uses us, in creating expectations with very real consequences for both organisation and employee, if these are not met.

2.2   Psychological Contracts

Rousseau (1995) mentions three types of promissory or promise-based contracts in organisations: psychological, normative, and implied. (There is also a fourth kind of contract, namely social contracts, which are broader societal/cultural contracts that can have implications for the different other types of contracts at work in organisational contexts).

Here, I focus on psychological contracts. These are defined as: "Beliefs that individuals hold regarding promises made, accepted, and relied on between themselves and another […]" (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9), and, in relation to organisations, psychological contracts are: "[…] individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization." (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9). This has also been described as follows: "Psychological contracts involve obligations informally held by employees regarding what they and the organization can expect of each other during the employment relationship" (Rousseau, 1995, in DeBode, Mossholder, and Walker, 2017, p. 45).

As can be seen from the above, the notion of 'promises' is central in this literature. Psychological contracts are a type of promissory or promise-based contracts, and, indeed: "Promises about the future are the essence of contracts […]" (Rousseau, 1995, p. xi).

Communication is central for promises, indeed: "Communication is the essence of promise." (Rousseau, 1995, p. 20). As I will show, communication is crucial for both contract making (through recruitment communication) and contract keeping (during employment). In my examples here, it is related to expectations formed and promises made in recruitment communication, e.g. the job interview. In job interviews, the company might present their current situation and vision for where they are going, and at the same time, the interview functions to establish whether expectations can be aligned, and foundations for a worthwhile actual contract between company and candidate can be created.

Importantly, violation of a psychological contract is a subjective assessment. A violation is a 'failure to comply with terms'. However: "[…] how people interpret the circumstances of this failure determines whether they *experience* a violation." (Rousseau, 1995, p. 112, emphasis in original). Again, communication is consequential, as "Some contract failures result not from an actual break but from a failure to communicate." (Rousseau, 1995, p. 112).

2.3 *The Intersection of Recruitment Communication, Organisational Socialisation and Psychological Contracts*

There is a range of research focusing on the relationship between organisational socialisation and the shaping or fulfillment of psychological contracts (e.g. DeBode et al., 2017; Thomas & Anderson, 1998; Woodrow & Guest, 2020). In this paper, I specifically focus on the tensions between recruitment communication and initial psychological contracts in start-ups.

3   Methodology

I draw on 16 narrative semi-structured interviews with newcomers and seven semi-structured interviews with managers from five Danish start-ups that served as case organisations. Table 1 gives an overview of the characteristics of the case start-ups (during the time of data collection), and the number of interviewed managers and newcomers in each (case start-up #1 was a pilot case not included here, thus the material that I draw on stem from Cases 2 - 6). The newcomers all held job positions related to ICT (e.g. as software developers), and they had been with the start-ups between two and four months when they were interviewed. I include the manager interviews in my presentation here since psychological contracts involve multiple parties, and thus investigating the recruitment communication challenges that managers mention and how they attempt to address these is also relevant.

Table 1: Overview of case start-ups and interviews (Table adapted from Table 2 and Table 3 in Rasmussen, 2019b)					
Case start-up #	*Activity*	*Year founded (recorded)*	*Approximate size of start-up (at time of interviewing)*	*Ownership structure (initially)*	*Interviews*
Case 2	B2B software development	2016	7-8 persons (December 2016 - February 2017)	Multiple founders as owner-managers (partners)	Managers: 1 Newcomers: 2
Case 3	B2B software development	2016	4-5 persons (June 2017 - September 2017)	Multiple founders as owner-managers (partners)	Managers: 1 Newcomers 2
Case 4	B2B software development	2016	10-16 persons (March 2017 - August 2017)	Shared corporate ownership Hired manager	Managers 1: Newcomers: 8
Case 5	B2B software development, consumer aspect (leisure)	2016	9-10 persons (April 2017 - June 2017)	One founder, owner-manager	Managers: 1 Newcomers: 2

Case 6	B2B software development, consumer aspect (shopping)	2014	8-9 persons (March 2017 - August 2017)	Multiple founders as owner-managers (partners)	Managers: 3 Newcomers: 2

In each of the case start-ups, I interviewed the manager(s) before interviewing the newcomers, in order to be able to ask the newcomers more specific questions about their experience of relevant aspects of the process that their manager had told me about. The interviews focused on the topics of organisational entry and knowledge communication. As regards the focus of this paper, the specific relevant parts of the manager interview guides involved questions related to e.g. what the managers considered to be necessary knowledge for new employees and how they would be introduced to this, what kind of information they would give them, and their procedures for welcoming new employees. Relevant parts of the newcomer interview guides involved questions asking them to tell about e.g. their processes of and experiences with entering the start-ups, their first impressions and their own evaluation of how well they were settling in. I conducted all interviews (in Danish or English) and transcribed them verbatim.

As regards the analysis, I first went through the transcripts and created an overview of different aspects mentioned by the newcomers and managers that related specifically to recruitment, job interviews, initial expectations and later experiences. This resulted in four broad categories, which I have discussed in the previously mentioned paper in HR Chefen (Rasmussen, 2019a). Overall, the four categories were labelled: 'Matching of expectations/alignment', 'Social and cultural fit', 'Uncertainty and challenges' and 'The form of the job interview and its content'. In relation to the specific focus of this paper, I then zoomed in on topics, within and across these categories, that newcomers and managers presented in ways that suggested or directly pointed to various tensions and challenges specifically connected to the relationship between recruitment communication and psychological contracts in the context of start-ups. In the following sections, I first give an overview over these topics, and then give empirical examples highlighting specific tensions related to the balance between recruitment communication and creating realistic expectations in start-ups.

4   Exemplifying Tensions between Recruitment Communication and Initial Psychological Contracts in Start-Ups

In this section, I first give an overview of the range of topics mentioned by newcomers and managers in the start-ups that are related to challenges in these companies' recruitment communication. I then give specific empirical examples of some of the challenges with recruitment communication in start-ups in relation to the newcomers' psychological contracts. Thus, I focus on recurrent challenges across the data set that can be understood in relation to psychological contracts.

Based on the exemplary analysis, I end the section by pointing towards two overall and inter-related patterns of challenges for recruitment communication in start-ups with implications for developing accurate and sustainable psychological contracts.

4.1   Overview of Topics

In my text about the job interview in start-ups (Rasmussen, 2019a), based on my empirical material, a number of challenges in connection with start-ups' recruitment communication were noted. The topics mentioned here connect to three out of the four categories mentioned earlier, namely 'Matching of expectations/alignment', 'Uncertainty and challenges' and 'The form of the job interview and its content'. The last category 'Social and cultural fit' does not cover any challenges, rather it covers managers' and newcomers' emphasis on social and cultural fit, and importantly how a good social and cultural fit can help alleviate or mitigate the impact of some conflicts and challenges. I return to the social as a 'buffer' in a later section.

Here, I lay out some central, and interrelated, topics and tendencies (highlighted through italics) which give rise to challenges, and in the following sections I provide empirical examples, offering a more detailed exemplary analysis.

Looking across the material, one recurrent aspect in managers' and newcomers' descriptions of job advertisements and job interviews in a start-up context is the *need for flexibility*. This is related to the *newness* of the start-ups, as there is a need for having the flexibility and *room to navigate* and *develop*. This is then connected to an *openness* and/or *vagueness* in - and sometimes even lack of - *descriptions of roles and tasks*. Several newcomers described experiencing interviews where *information was not very exact but rather very general*, and that this made them perceive the *description* of what *job* they were interviewing for, and also the *descriptions of the start-ups* as such, as *'fluffy'*. Additionally, some newcomers mentioned that they felt that because the start-up was an *unknown company*,

the hiring managers had engaged in more *'selling' of the workplace/company* (as such) and their *vision* than might have been necessary in other companies.

 This creates a tension. It is sometimes difficult for the start-up managers to be more precise about the role and tasks, e.g. because the newcomers are meant to play a big part in developing a certain function (which is often why the start-ups are recruiting in the first place), but the openness then creates some ambiguity for the candidates, especially as they take up their new position and set to work.

4.2 Tensions and Empirical Examples

In the following, I offer examples of some of the challenges and tensions related to recruitment communication in start-ups and expectations mentioned above. These examples also touch on the relationship between psychological contract making and contract keeping, i.e. going from the recruitment process to employment. The examples illustrate different challenges, as the newcomers touch on promises/perceived promises and surprises/violations. After having presented examples focusing on the newcomers' perspective (sub-sections 4.2.1 - 4.2.3), I will also include a brief presentation and discussion of the topic of 'alignment' (sub-section 4.2.4), which was prevalent in the manager interviews, as the existence of the challenges newcomers mention connects to but also contrasts with the managers' expression of their efforts to ensure alignment and matching of expectations. I end this section by highlighting that the various tensions taken together point towards two overall tendencies both related to the challenge of providing candidates with accurate information about the workplace and the specific tasks (sub-section 4.2.5).

4.2.1 Coping with Muddle

As a first example of surprise, one newcomer said:

> "[…] I guess I had from uh when I was at job interview then at any rate I had an expectation that there was quite good control of uh what you should do here in the beginning [me: Mh]" (newcomer 2 in case start-up 4, my translation).

From his job interview, this newcomer had gotten the impression that there was a clearer plan for the direction of the start-up and the work to be carried out. But when he started, it turned out that they had to start somewhere else, and the reality was more muddled and there were less plans than expected.

4.2.2 Unexpected Tasks

A related surprise is evident in the next example, which is long but illustrative considering the challenges that I aim to illustrate in this paper. Another newcomer said:

> "[…] in that way I have probably been a little more surprised about what my tasks were [me: Yes] than I . yes than I had expected and than I had wished for uh so yes I thought I was coming in to do data science uh and something with some procedures [me: Yes] or yes I thought that I was going to do data science and at some point be product owner [me: Yes] and it turns out that that data science part is very small for me and the process part and technology part and all the basic foundational aspects and such like are a lot bigger for me and that I would probably have liked to have known [me: Yes] but but on the other hand if I had known that I might not have accepted the job [me: No] so uh so in that way I have not entirely known what I said yes to" (newcomer 8 in case start-up 4, my translation).

This newcomer mentions an important tension: he would have liked to know that the workplace was more chaotic than the impression he got from the job interview and that the tasks he finds most exciting would take up less of his time than more basic or trivial tasks, but also says that if he had known this, he might not have accepted the job in the first place.

 In relation to task expectations, there is here a problem of attracting through selling certain tasks and then not living up to these tasks being in focus. In this start-up context, it might be that the foundation needs to be built before the other skills can be used. However, the newcomer expected to use more specific skills from the beginning, instead of the general skills he felt he was using. Rousseau (1995) refers to this type of psychological contract violation as a 'nature of job' violation (p. 116).

4.2.3 Lack of Plans and Unexpected Work Tasks – But also Some Acceptance

In general, in the start-up where the above examples are from, there were several newcomers who expressed that, through the recruitment communication, they had gotten the impression and expectation that things were more settled/under control.

However, in the interviews, there was also a tendency for the newcomers to express acceptance of or recognising that it was a start-up environment, and thus expressing understanding and acceptance that not all things are settled when you enter such an organisation. This 'acceptance repertoire' was also connected to an 'influence repertoire', which occurred when the newcomers expressed that they were also attracted by the newness and smallness of start-ups, which they connected with the opportunity to take part in influencing and decision-making, and expectations of agility and rapid progress from idea to delivery.

But it seems that, since they got the impression and thus expected that some things were more settled/in control, this was also connected to an expectation that they could get started on the exciting elements they had been attracted by (knowledge intensive, agile, fast time-to-deliver development) from the beginning, i.e. an assumption that they could get started on the attractive tasks quicker.

4.2.4 Manager Interviews: Alignment

When I interviewed managers, they mentioned trying to hire people with certain mindsets, e.g. who have experience and/or are motivated by newness, and people who are self-driven. They also stressed 'alignment' and matching of expectations, focusing on ensuring that candidates understand the conditions connected to working in a start-up environment, e.g. in relation to resource constraints.

As an example, one of the interviewed managers in Case 6 emphasised that they were looking for self-motivated (the literal translation of the Danish word the manager used would be 'self-driven') and independent candidates, because they did not have the resources to constantly supervise new employees:

> "[…] and we would like to that is we try to recruit for people who have a high degree of independence because when we are not bigger than we are then there is not that is there are not resources to sit and hover around you all the time […]" (manager 3 in case start-up 6, my translation).

The same manager also acknowledged that, in a job interview, it was easy for anyone to say that (s)he is able to work independently, so they would e.g. give their candidates a case to solve to give the candidate the opportunity to prove it.

However, staying with this manager, he also mentioned that they did not have a lot of recruitments 'under their belt' yet, and initially their approach had been rather a 'trial and error' process. Another manager in the same start-up reflected on communication being a challenge for them, as they were passionate about their company and product, but they were not 'communication people'. Both managers and newcomers across the start-ups mentioned that recruitment and hiring was a learning process not just for the candidates but also for the (sometimes inexperienced) start-up managers.

At the same time, these managers are also facing a complex communicative task. Even though they (sometimes as the result of 'trial and error') have a focus on matching of expectations and ensuring alignment as well as an awareness that they need people who are self-motivated and can take initiative, they still face the challenge of selling a job while making sure that candidates understand and are prepared for the fact that working in a start-up can come with an extra set of challenges, e.g. as the road is not clear-cut but is being paved along the way.

4.2.5 Recruitment Communication Challenges in Start-Ups

Based on the above, two interrelated challenges for recruitment communication in start-ups can be pin-pointed here: 1) inaccuracy in the recruitment communication about the state of plans for the organisation, and 2) inaccuracy in the recruitment communication concerning the primary work tasks connected to a position. Here, it is important to point out that these inaccuracies in the communication might not be advertent. For instance, one newcomer said that it was clear that the manager he had interviewed with also thought that the plans were more settled and more feasible, and thus this newcomer did not blame the hiring manager for creating an impression in the job interview that this was the case.

In addition to the examples of perceived violations and unmet expectations mentioned above, the newcomers mentioned different challenges related to unclarity and uncertainty – challenges inherently related to the start-up context. For instance, one newcomer mentioned that it was 'fluffy' at the job interview what it was all about, and another newcomer mentioned unclear expectations. This creates uncertainty and results in messy or less specified psychological contracts. This is an important aspect of recruitment communication in start-ups, because a central part of psychological contracts is that the parties know what they can expect from each other, which Rousseau (1995) refers to as mutuality. As regards newcomer 8 in case start-up 4 (see example in section 4.2.2), in the job interview, the

newcomer formed an impression of the requirement to deliver quickly and taking part in shaping/decision-making but found that specific expectations were unclear. After some weeks, the newcomer ended up calling a meeting with his manager, partly to talk about expectations, asking 'am I doing what I am supposed to be doing?'.

5 Discussion

Based on the above, I will discuss the violations and the tension between selling a job and realistic expectations in start-up recruitment communication. I then go on to outlining my theoretical and practical contributions before touching on some limitations and future research.

5.1 Selling a Job and Realistic Expectations – An Unsolvable Tension?

First, it should be pointed out that most of the perceived violations seemed to be inadvertent violations. This suggests a need for more awareness of the effects of the recruitment communication, or at least recognising the potential problems connected to certain strategies, e.g. the risk of 'nature of job' violations.

As an example, the start-ups sometimes rely extensively on buzz words such as 'AI' (artificial intelligence) and 'machine learning' in their job postings, and also mention these in the job interviews. This can create an expectation that these are central aspects of the job from day one. In terms of aiming at attracting and recruiting certain candidates referring to these terms is meaningful, as these are 'hot' in IT and might attract candidates with certain interests, but if working with them turns out not to take up as much of the employee's time as the position is 'sold' on, then this results in a contract violation, as the example with newcomer 8 and his expectations of being heavily involved in knowledge intensive data science from the onset mentioned above shows. I.e. although referring to state of the art technologies and buzz words might be good to attract specific candidates (or even necessary just to be able to compete with the many other start-ups and large IT companies who also highlight these buzz words in their job advertisements), it creates an expectation for the newcomers that this is central in their job, and it might be necessary to explain in job interviews that while these are part of the job, it might be necessary to first develop the foundation from which to use them. I.e. while it can be legitimate for the start-ups to use the buzz words, because they do work with the newest technologies, they also need to ensure that candidates are prepared for the fact that other (more practical) tasks are also part of the everyday work in a start-up (and a number of the newcomers acknowledged this in my interviews and did accept it, to some extent). If you promise candidates the opportunity to work with the newest technologies, then you need to live up to this. The same goes for start-ups promising candidates autonomy, then this needs to be facilitated somehow, because they will expect it. For instance, one manager in Case 6 mentioned that they wrote in job postings that there was opportunity to influence and somewhat free hands, but the managers responsible for technology decisions in the start-up actually had quite specific ideas and opinions about what they wanted something to be like.

In addition, managers might be excited about their ideas and vision, and fail to communicate that while this is where they are going, they are not there yet. This means that, e.g. in job interviews, sharing the vision can be meaningful to motivate candidates, showing them what kind of journey and which goal they could become involved in the journey towards, but some considerations for the promises that are made towards the candidate and the clarity, accuracy and feasibility of these are also advisable here.

Over-promising and under-delivering results in (or at least creates the risk of) newcomers perceiving the psychological contracts as having been violated. On the other hand, under-promising and over-delivering is also problematic, in the sense that the start-up might offer great opportunities but generate little interest in its job postings. As such, over-promise and under-deliver on the one hand, and under-promise and over-deliver on the other is a two-edged sword. Under-promise and over-deliver may be better than over-promise and under-deliver (at least when the candidate then enters), but under-promising might make it difficult to 'sell' the workplace/job in the first place. I.e., on the face of it, the start-ups and hiring managers have to deal with a kind of catch-22, where underselling can mean that they do not attract the right people at all, whereas overselling can lead to them initially attracting the right people, but ending up with high newcomer turnover, as a result of perceived violations of the psychological contract. As such, neither is a viable solution.

Even though this is not a problem with a simple once and for all solution, the challenges might at least to some extent be mitigated. There does not need to be a gap between attracting and the organisational reality. This starts with understanding what the candidates are attracted by: in my case start-ups, the organisational size and newness is often highlighted, because this is connected with expectations of agility, opportunity to influence, and better contact with colleagues. And for the most part, the newcomers do actually get this. However, the start-ups could maybe do even more to communicate that in an organisation where this is possible, there are also some conditions. E.g. insecurity and the need to sometimes take on less attractive tasks. Remember Rousseau's (1995) contention that some perceived

violations are due to a failure to communicate. So while newcomers might begin to focus on what was not part of their contract, they might not see the parts of the contract which are actually being fulfilled.

Managers highlight alignment (e.g. regarding the way of working considering the conditions in start-ups), but maybe they could highlight, or at least be aware of, that while there are attractive benefits of working in a start-up, that also comes with some conditions. E.g. for people who have been used to working in mature companies, stepping into a start-up can be very different.

This is somewhat reminiscent of realistic job previews (Wanous, 1977), but due to the dynamics of the start-up situation, it can be difficult (if not impossible, at least in the early phases) with a workplace and tasks that can be developing and emerging, but then that might be what should be highlighted; The attractive aspects, and then the 'frame'/conditions, which is what to some extent facilitates the attractive aspects. It might be difficult to provide realistic job previews in start-ups due to the challenge that positions/functions and their content can develop. I.e. while it might be possible to adequately portray some aspects, it would be difficult to accurately pre-illustrate the full 'employee journey'. So, in start-ups, instead of a job preview, it might be more about trying to preview the kind of organisation and its operating conditions.

The initial psychological contract might look like this:

Organisation's promise: providing opportunity (to influence, for personal development)
Candidate's promise: engagement, contributing

Several of the managers I interviewed highlighted that they could not offer the best pay, but what they can offer is for instance the opportunity to influence and personal development, but then they need to not only communicate this but also live up to it. The link between contract making and contract keeping has a lot to do with enacting what one has espoused. So while, in recruitment communication, to attract it might be tempting to communicate alluring promises, the consequences of not living up to these will result in problems for the start-up. At least for a start, while there might still be unmet expectations for various reasons, at least the start-up can try not to contribute to the candidates forming unrealistic expectations.

Finally, it should also be noted that psychological contracts are dynamic and that there are two parties to a contract. Rousseau (1995) mentions strong relationships and frequent interactions as factors that reduce experienced violation (p. 133), and that the experience of violation is related to both individual's perspectives and behaviour of the violator (before, during and after violation). In my cases, the social was highlighted as a 'buffer' for individual uncertainty, e.g. when it was highlighted that all the people in the organisation were 'in the same boat', making the uncertainty something shared to be dealt with together, rather than an individual insecurity or frustration.

5.2   Contributions

With communication not only being part of the problem, but also part of the solution, in the following I outline some contributions to theory and practice.

5.2.1   Contributions to Theory

As regards theoretical implications, I have shown how it is possible to understand newcomers' frustrations as related to violations of their initial psychological contracts, specifically in relation to
contextual aspects related to start-ups' situations which make some recruitment communication aspects particularly tricky for start-ups, i.e. that it can be difficult to negotiate a clear and accurate psychological contract in the first place in these emerging organisations with developments in both strategic direction and tasks, who often hire newcomers to contribute not just at the task level but also at the more strategic decision-making level.

5.2.2   Contributions to Practice

The interviewed managers pointed to various challenges themselves, for the younger managers, this included their communication competencies. Above, I have pointed out how aspects connected to the situation of being a start-up can make recruitment communication difficult, so even if these young managers felt more confident about their communication competencies, the ongoing developments in their organisations might still present a number of challenges for them in terms of e.g. presenting concrete roles in job advertisements and interviews.

In this paper, I have pointed to two interrelated aspects where newcomers mentioned discrepancies between the information they were first presented with, and the experiences they had when they entered the start-ups, namely: 1) how the state/situation of the start-up was presented, and 2) how their work tasks were presented. Regarding the latter, newcomers mentioned both that the assignments connected to a role might be misrepresented, and that information in the job interviews might be 'fluffy'.

Accordingly, it can be suggested that managers should be aware of what and how they communicate about these aspects. And while there are some challenges which cannot all be solved or avoided in advance but need to be addressed continuously because the start-up is developing, the managers can also address this in job interviews. And, importantly, they can also make sure to have a continuous matching of expectations with their newcomers. In that way, an important first step is to be aware of the potential promises made in the recruitment communication, and following up on these, also in discussions with the newcomers, once they have entered the start-ups. For start-ups, this is especially important considering that "Contracts based on some degree of mutuality are the basis of flexibility in emerging organizations and enterprises." (Rousseau, 1995, p. 22). As such, the dynamic nature of psychological contracts is perhaps especially important to ensure good employment relationships in emerging organisations, enhanced by the fact that the start-up situation means that it can be difficult to accurately and extensively portray e.g. roles and specific tasks in the initial recruitment communication.

5.3   *Limitations and Additional Perspectives for Future Research*

This paper reports on research in development. In order to add to the cross-sectional case study design with interviews used to gain these first insights, two additional interesting avenues could be: 1) to also conduct interviews with newcomers who leave start-ups early after their entry to learn more about the potential perceived psychological contract violations that led to the turnover, and 2) to follow newcomers over a period of time, since psychological contracts are dynamic, to investigate potential fluctuations and what works well and less well in the relationship between contract making, contract renegotiation and contract keeping.

In this paper, I have identified several challenges to start-ups' recruitment communication and pointed to a number of reasons that these challenges exist. Pursuing further research along the lines sketched above would contribute with additional insights relevant to the discussion of how start-ups might handle these challenges.

6   Conclusion

In this paper, I have addressed 'the dark side of communication' in the sense that communication - especially recruitment communication in start-ups - is tricky, and perhaps sometimes more tricky than recognised. This is likely to be particularly so in the context of ICT start-ups, considering that the 'war for talent' is particularly strong in that industry. Specifically, in order to position themselves as legitimate and attractive employers, it seems one of the challenges for the start-ups is that they follow current employer branding trends related to the ICT profession, e.g. relying on industry buzz words and reproducing accepted employer value propositions, but due to their neophyte development status as organisations, the start-ups have problems living up to these promises from day one, e.g. owing to various resource constraints. This is to some extent reminiscent of mechanisms related to institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), but the challenge in the present context is that, in the process of establishing themselves as employers, the start-ups, who often have visions of being different from existing ICT giants, end up reproducing existing employer branding trends, including promises that might be difficult to live up to in the short run. This means that the creation of the initial psychological contract between candidate/newcomer and start-up is founded on a set of (perceived) promises and expectations that might quickly conflict with the real-world and practical situation of the start-ups.

In the cases studied here, communication is both part of what creates the challenge (the 'dark side'), and something that can help in mitigating it. I.e. communication can be both part of the problem (as challenges) and part of the solution, when it comes to the phenomenon of attracting and recruiting as contract making, and afterwards contract keeping. This requires awareness of that process, awareness of how to work to possibly avoid the challenges and how communication is also central in mitigating and/or remedying the challenges when they occur.

I have pointed to central challenges in start-up recruitment communication, and in balancing attracting candidates and creating viable psychological contracts with (potential) employees, the constructive forces of communication add a layer of difficulty to the already challenging and uncertain reality that many start-ups face. I encourage employer branding researchers, and organisational research in general, to focus more on small and new companies, which would allow us to investigate the extent to which our existing theories are relevant to their context and to develop practical recommendations for the benefit of both start-ups and employees.

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