Ethics in Employee Selection: What You Want to Know but are Afraid to Ask

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Despite the fact that diversity management in the workplace has been regulated by equal employment opportunity legislation for decades, the topic of ethics in employee selection has not been widely examined. It can be argued that most managers’ modus operandi considers what is legal the same as what is ethical. This narrow mindset coupled with the dominant utilitarian view in decision making may explain why corporate managers around the world are conflicted when it comes to making ethical hiring decisions. For example, according to a recent survey of college graduates with incomes in the top quarter of their occupational group, forty-three percent of British respondents, fifty-six percent of Americans and sixty percent of Swedes continue to agree with Milton Friedman’s classic 1970 [1] assertion "the social responsibility of business is to increase its profit" [2]. Given such survey results, it is not surprising to see that in order to satisfy multiple corporate stakeholders, managers are prone to making decisions that may be legal (i.e., hiring based on merit), but not ethical (i.e., poaching talent from competitors, making it an unfair hiring practice).

Employee selection is an interesting area within which to view the role of ethics on decision making. Given the importance of making a good hiring decision, or avoiding making a false positive or false negative hiring decision, there are strong utilitarian considerations involved in most selection decisions. However, in this editorial, it is my argument that in addition to utilitarian criteria in making hiring decisions, the ethical sensitivity or awareness of fairness and rights should also be taken into account in order to achieve ethical hiring decisions.

Despite nearly fifty years of enforcement of equal employment opportunity laws in which hiring managers are prohibited to make hiring decisions based on non-job related factors (e.g., sex, race, religion, national origin, color, disability, and age), the effectiveness of diversity management programs (e.g., promoting women in traditionally male occupations) have had limited success [3]. On the other hand, hiring managers are still inconsistent in following ethical principles. For example, according to a recent survey published in the Wall Street Journal, executives in the financial and technology industries were the most aggressive when it comes to recruiting such talent from competitors, making it an unfair hiring practice.

Researchers reported that whereas the use of going undercover of recruitment practices as being "normal"; "aggressive", "unethical", or illegal. Both candidates were otherwise considered equally qualified. Students who chose to hire the external male candidate were found to have a lower level of moral/ethical sensitivity compared to those who chose to hire the external female candidate [8]. In another experimental study, Nguyen [9] found that among two equally qualified candidates, the male candidate is significantly more likely to be selected compared to the female candidate. The results of the above two studies indicate that despite decades of enforcing EEO laws, the impact of such laws on promoting women in the workplace remains small. We as business educators may need to do a better job at sensitizing our students who will be future managers about the ethical implications in hiring.

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decisions. This means we need to raise the level of ethical awareness among our students because without ethical awareness, any effort in teaching ethical principles will be futile.

References