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Article abstract

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This article reports the findings of a study of operative and espoused personnel selection criteria of managers. A projective test (derived from Kelly's Rep Test and Brown's Personnel Decision Analysis Form) was used to elicit and measure the strength of operative selection criteria while a short questionnaire sought demographic data and espoused selection criteria.

Personnel selection is one of the most important functions in the management of an organization. In the final analysis, it is the quality of the employees of a firm that makes it successful.

In recent times, as unemployment has reached high levels and competition for jobs has increased significantly, the importance of personnel selection has escalated. It would therefore be appropriate under present economic conditions to intensify research into the personnel selection process. This paper is an effort in this direction.

The focus of this study was two categories of personnel selection criteria — operative and espoused. Espoused criteria are those which individuals tell others that the organization is using; they are those criteria that are openly displayed. Operative criteria are those used by people in actual decision-making (Brown, 1979). The relationship between these criteria is not as obvious as it may seem: one may suspect that what persons do is related to what they say they will do. However, this is not always the case.

This study sought the operative and espoused personnel selection criteria of managers of manufacturing firms. The term «operative criteria» refers to «criteria in use» and is different from the term «espoused criteria» which refers to «posted criteria». Brown (1979) discusses these terms. He

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claims that posted and operative criteria are now used in the same way that Argyris uses the terms «espoused theories» and «theories in use» in describing the theories of behaviour held by persons (Brown, 1979, p. 8). The espoused criteria of a person are those he/she tells others that he/she uses when directly asked the question. For example, if one asks the Human Resource Manager of Company X what criteria are being used to hire staff at that company one is likely to hear such adjectives as mature, smart, sincere and dedicated. These are espoused criteria; they are posted criteria which are also the criteria placed in job vacancy advertisements and in job descriptions. Operative criteria are those talents, characteristics, behaviours, attitudes, virtues, knowledges and skills that, in reality, make a contribution to a person's personnel decision (Brown, 1979, p. 6). One's posted (espoused) criteria and operative criteria may or may not be the same.

From the above it is clear that the discovery of espoused criteria is a simple task — we simply ask people what, for example, their personnel selection criteria are. The discovery of operative criteria, on the other hand, is not so simple a task. However, there is a way of discovering such criteria. This method is based on the use of an instrument derived from Kelly's Role Construct Repertory Test (Rep Test). First published by Kelly in 1955, the Rep Test is directly related to Personal Construct Theory. Kelly called his philosophical assumptions *constructive alternativism*. This concept refers to the assumption that there are always some alternative constructions available to choose from in dealing with the world.

Kelly's Personal Construct Theory is made up of one fundamental postulate and elaborated by eleven corollaries. The fundamental postulate is that a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he/she anticipates events (Kelly, 1955, pp. 46-104).

Using the fundamental postulate and its eleven corollaries and detailed examination of concepts (such as personal constructs, as a base) Kelly devised the Role Construct Repertory Test (Rep Test) to use as an instrument for eliciting personal constructs. Constructs are elicited by asking subjects to determine, from observing combinations of three persons (three is used as an example, the number of persons may vary) at a time, in what important ways two are alike but different from the third.

The Rep Test and Personal Construct Theory assume that the constructs employed by an individual when perceiving an object, event, or people influence that person's behaviour. The instrument gathers qualitative information, which is analysed quantitatively to reveal the subjects' operative constructs. These can then be interpreted (Rix, 1980, p. 40).

Variations of the Rep Test have been used to study a wide array of topics. For example, one variation of the test called the Discrimination Perception Repertory Test (DPRT) «is to identify the operative criteria employed by persons in making decisions, judgements, hunches or recommendations about other persons whom they know» (Brown, 1979, p. 12). The instrument used in this study is an adaptation of this test.

This study also looked at how age and education affect operative criteria. Why were these variables chosen?

Kelly (1955) argues that identity can be modified by experience. In the case of personnel selection criteria, experience is best measured by age since such criteria are held by individuals whether they are personnel managers or not. Therefore, development of selection criteria of the respondents in this study did not start when they assumed the role of personnel managers but long before that point. Age therefore becomes the best measure of experience in this context. Atchley (1985) contends that aging affects the stability of identity in several ways. One such impact is that aging usually leads to a stable personal identity since the passing of time provides one with more opportunities to test one's theory of self. One's theory of self, in turn, impacts upon one's behaviour and this includes management behaviour of which the personnel function is a part. Perhaps as a result of this theoretical linkage, researchers have investigated the influence of age on personnel decisions (e.g., Cleveland and Landry, 1981; Rosen and Jerdee, 1978).

John Dewey saw education as the construction and progressive reconstruction of experience (Pounds and Bryner, 1967). Kelly (1955), as stated above, asserts that identity can be modified by experience and this, as argued above, will eventually have an impact on behaviour. This theoretical linkage has been supported by empirical evidence. Wright and Hamilton (1979) found support for the hypothesis that the college experience influences what people regard as important to them in their work (p. 73). After examining the evidence which exists on the impact of education, Lawler (1985) concludes that education leads to skills acquisition, desire for influence on work decisions, expectations of higher rewards and upward mobility and desire for interesting work. These are all variables which may have an impact on work behaviour. For the personnel manager, selection of employees is usually a significant part of such behaviour.

METHOD

Two approaches selected for use in this study were the administration of a projective test and a questionnaire. These approaches were incorporated into a single research instrument.

The projective test (derived from Kelly's Rep Test and Brown's Personnel Decision Analysis Form) used in this study was selected for two reasons. First, it could discover operative criteria used by individuals. Second, the test was not designed to study a particular topic and modification of it does not diminish its effectiveness.

The research instrument used in this study was presented in six pages. Page 1 contained an introduction to the exercise and was intended as an explanation of what the exercise was being used to discover. This was used to supplement the cover letter which was sent to all prospective respondents. In this introduction, the phrase «personnel selection criteria» was defined as those qualities, characteristics or qualifications that persons use in selecting employees for their organizations. Some examples of such criteria were listed so as to clarify the task being assigned and to ensure that this task was constant from respondent to respondent.

On page 2, the mechanics of the exercise were discussed and the first of four steps presented. In this step the respondent was asked to first identify three persons who he/she has hired or would hire and then to identify three persons whom he/she did not hire or would not hire as employees of his/her firm. The first three persons were to be labeled A, B, and C and the second three were to be labeled X, Y, and Z.

In step II, A, B, C, X, Y, and Z were arranged in eighteen different combinations and the respondent was asked to write on dotted lines following each combination, one quality, characteristic or qualification possessed by two employees or prospective employees and not by the other (in each combination) or not possessed by two and possessed by the other. Therefore, each respondent could have written down eighteen qualities, characteristics or qualifications but because of repeats this is not usually the case.

In step III, the respondent was asked to rate each employee (or prospective employee) individually against the qualities, characteristics and qualifications stated in the second step. To do this, he/she circled «yes» or «no» to indicate his/her agreement or disagreement that the employee (or prospective employee) in question possesses the qualities, characteristics and qualifications stated in the second step. Thus, under Candidate A, «yes» and «no» were printed eighteen times to allow the respondent to rate

Candidate A according to the eighteen qualities, qualifications and characteristics expressed in step II. This procedure was repeated for Candidates B, C, X, Y, and Z.

In step IV, the respondent was asked to provide four items of personal data (the independent variables) and to list five qualities, characteristics or qualifications he/she viewed as being most important for employees of his/her firm to possess. These five attributes were taken as the espoused personnel selection criteria while those identified in step II were taken as the operative.

A total of forty-one personnel managers of manufacturing firms in Windsor, Ontario, participated in this study. Of the forty-one respondents, twenty-five were below the age of forty¹ while twenty were university graduates. This split of the respondents according to the independent variables of «age» and «education» provided the basis for testing their relationship to the strength with which the constructs (criteria) were used.

FINDINGS

The data collected through the methods outlined earlier were analysed in two parts — Rep Test data and espoused or posted data. Scores were obtained from the Rep Test by using the following procedure:

By subtracting the XYZ weightings from the ABC weightings of each construct one obtains a mode index of the *power* of that single criterion upon the original decision (indices will range from 0 to +/−3, the sign being only an indicator of direction of contribution). By averaging all the criteria that fall within one category of the groups' protocols, one derives a more communicable index of the *decision power* of that category. (Brown, 1979, p. 14)

All «yes» responses were assigned the numerical value of one and all «no» responses were assigned a value of zero. Therefore, if there were three «yes» responses to a particular construct for A, B, and C and three «no» responses to the construct for X, Y and Z then the power of that particular construct was 3, i.e. $(1 + 1 + 1) - (0 + 0 + 0)$. The *average power* of a particular construct for a group of respondents was calculated by adding the individual *power* scores and dividing the total by the number of persons in

¹ Age forty is regarded as the chronological point signalling the beginning of middle age. Many physical and psychological changes occur during middle age but the change of direct relevance to this study is that «job careers often reach a plateau of routine performance» (ATCHLEY, 1985, p. 7). The implication for personnel selection is that this routine may result in the use of criteria with stronger force.

that group. Thus, if the power of a construct for three respondents was 3, 2 and 1, then the average power of this construct would be 2, i.e., $(3 + 2 + 1) \div 3$.

Another meaningful value in evaluating the strength of constructs for groups is the sum of the power scores of the persons in a group for a particular construct. This value may be called *total power* of a construct. This value is of significance for it is a reflection of both the strength with which a construct is mentioned and the number of persons mentioning it.

In Rep Test Exercises such as the one used in this study the first thing a respondent does is make a decision. It is assumed that the decision reflects the respondent's personal views or beliefs. If one wants to discover a person's basic views, one may ask that person to make a real life decision — a decision that person normally makes in the conduct of his/her work. A process for analysing that decision is then utilized. This process is embodied in the Rep Test Exercise. In this exercise, the respondent's reporting of constructs that bear upon this decision is obtained in a way that makes rank-ordering of these constructs possible. This rank-ordering of constructs represents the respondent's «prioritized» criteria in making this decision. Those criteria that differentiate most sharply contribute most strongly to the formation of this decision, that is, they have the strongest decision power. Those that do not differentiate sharply represent criteria that contribute little to this particular decision — they have weak decision power.

The relative strength or weakness of each criterion represents the decision power of the criterion and because this criterion is the one operating at a particular time for a particular decision it is referred to as an operative view or criterion (Brown, 1982).

Frequency of Use and Average Power of Personnel Selection Criteria for All Respondents

The total number of different personnel selection criteria used by all the respondents ($n = 41$) was twenty four (see Table 1).

Of a total of 738 (18×41) possible responses, «attitude» was used 102 times, «enthusiasm» 88 times, «honesty» 79 times, «competence» 73 times, and «dedication» 71 times.

TABLE 1
Frequency of Use (f) and Average Power (a) of Personnel Selection
Criteria (Constructs) for All Respondents

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>a</i>
1. Attitude	102	2.26
2. Enthusiasm	80	2.06
3. Honesty	79	2.13
4. Competence	73	2.06
5. Dedication	71	2.11
6. Intelligence	61	1.77
7. Loyalty	58	2.02
8. Education/Knowledge	42	2.33
9. Experience	39	2.54
10. Appearance	15	3.00
11. Abstinence from Drugs	14	2.50
12. Personality	13	2.58
13. Work History	13	2.13
14. Initiative/Motivation	12	2.30
15. Reliability	11	2.00
16. Physical Strength	11	2.50
17. Maturity	11	1.72
18. Punctuality	9	1.50
19. Communication skills	9	2.30
20. Potential	6	2.33
21. Residence (Rural vs. Urban)	6	3.00
22. Persistence	5	2.00
23. Age	3	3.00
24. Salary Requirements	2	3.00

Frequency of Use and Average Power of Personnel Selection Criteria by Age

The total number of constructs used by respondents over forty years old was seventeen and for those forty years and under this number was twenty-two (see Table 2).

Respondents over forty years old chose the following constructs most often:

- a) Enthusiasm (42 times);
- b) Attitude (36 times);
- c) Honesty (31 times).

The most frequently used construct for respondents who were forty years old and below were:

- a) Attitude (66 times);
- b) Competence (51 times);
- c) Honesty (48 times).

The indication here is that on the measure «frequency of use» there is some difference between those forty years old and below and those above forty years old.

However, the «average power» with which constructs are used is a more meaningful measure than «frequency of use» in analysing the basis of decision-making (personnel selection in this case). For respondents over forty years old «average power» ranged from 1.86 to 3.00 while for the remainder of the respondents this range was 1.50 to 3.00.

The following hypothesis was tested:

There is a significant relationship between the strength of conviction² with which criteria are used and age of managers.

A t-value of 2.27 was obtained. Since the value of $t_{.05,39} = 2.02$ the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, the data do indicate a relationship (significant at the .05 level) between the strength of conviction with which criteria are used and age of the managers, the indication being that the older managers displayed greater strength of conviction.

Frequency of Use and Average Power of Personnel Selection Criteria by Education

A total of twenty-one constructs were used by both respondents who are university graduates and those who are not (see Table 3). The following criteria were most heavily used by the former:

- a) Attitude (51 times);
- b) Dedication (43 times);
- c) Loyalty (39 times);
- d) Honesty (36 times).

Those respondents who are not university graduates showed a preference for the following criteria:

- a) Attitude (56 times);
- b) Enthusiasm (51 times);
- c) Honesty (42 times);
- d) Competence (31 times).

² Strength of conviction was measured by the mean of the average power scores of the various criteria used by a particular group.

TABLE 2
Frequency of Use (f) and Average Power (a) of Personnel Selection
Criteria (Constructs) by Age

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Over 40 years</i> <i>(n = 16)</i>		<i>Less than 41 years</i> <i>(n = 25)</i>	
	<i>f</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>a</i>
1. Honesty	31	2.36	48	2.03
2. Competence	22	2.07	51	2.06
3. Intelligence	24	1.88	37	1.71
4. Dedication	23	1.86	48	2.21
5. Loyalty	12	2.10	46	2.00
6. Enthusiasm	42	2.00	38	2.08
7. Attitude	36	2.56	66	2.01
8. Appearance	15	3.00	—	—
9. Education/Knowledge	24	2.71	18	2.00
10. Initiative/Motivation	2	2.50	10	2.25
11. Persistence	—	—	5	2.00
12. Experience	23	2.92	16	2.20
13. Communication Skills	1	3.00	6	2.00
14. Age	3	3.00	—	—
15. Potential	5	2.00	1	3.00
16. Work History	—	—	13	2.12
17. Residence (Rural vs. Urban)	—	—	6	3.00
18. Salary Requirements	—	—	2	3.00
19. Punctuality	—	—	9	1.50
20. Reliability	—	—	11	2.00
21. Personality	1	3.00	12	2.08
22. Physical Strength	5	3.00	6	1.50
23. Maturity	—	—	11	1.72
24. Abstinence from Drugs	13	2.50	1	3.00

The criterion that stands out on this measure is «enthusiasm» which was used fifty-one times by non-university graduates and only twenty-seven times by university graduates.

Average Power scores ranged from 1.00 to 3.00 for «non-graduates» and from 1.50 to 3.00 for «graduates». The following hypothesis was tested:

There is a significant relationship between the strength of conviction with which criteria are used and level of education attained by managers.

A t-value of 2.10 was obtained. Since the value of $t_{.05,39} = 2.02$, the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, as for the variable «age», the data do indicate a relationship (significant at the .05 level) between the strength of

conviction with which criteria are used and level of education attained by managers, the indication being that university graduates displayed greater strength of conviction.

TABLE 3
Frequency of Use (f) and Average Power (a) of Personnel Selection
Criteria (Constructs) by Education

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>University</i> <i>Graduates</i> <i>(n = 20)</i>		<i>Non-University</i> <i>Graduates</i> <i>(n = 21)</i>	
	<i>f</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>a</i>
1. Honesty	36	2.29	42	2.00
2. Competence	35	2.28	36	1.77
3. Intelligence	33	2.10	28	1.55
4. Dedication	43	2.42	28	1.38
5. Loyalty	39	2.21	19	1.69
6. Enthusiasm	27	2.62	51	1.54
7. Attitude	51	2.26	56	2.27
8. Experience	20	2.69	19	2.60
9. Education/Knowledge	13	2.50	29	2.30
10. Initiative/Motivation	2	3.00	8	2.13
11. Persistence	—	—	5	2.00
12. Appearance	1	3.00	14	3.00
13. Communication Skills	7	2.25	2	2.50
14. Age	—	—	3	3.00
15. Potential	3	2.00	3	1.00
16. Work History	8	2.83	5	0.00
17. Residence (Rural vs. Urban)	6	3.00	—	—
18. Salary Requirements	2	3.00	—	—
19. Punctuality	9	1.50	—	—
20. Reliability	4	2.00	7	2.00
21. Personality	10	2.58	3	3.00
22. Physical Strength	8	2.25	3	3.00
23. Maturity	8	2.08	2	1.00
24. Abstinence from Drugs	—	—	14	2.67

Total Power of Personnel Selection Criteria Used for All Respondents

Value of «total power» of personnel selection criteria used by all respondents ranged from 2.0 to 56.6. The criteria with the highest total power were (in descending order):

- 1) Attitude;
- 2) Enthusiasm;
- 3) Honesty;
- 4) Dedication;
- 5) Competence.

Since total power is a reflection of both the strength with which constructs are used and the number of persons using them the above list represents the most significant operative personnel selection criteria of the respondents (taken as a group).

TABLE 4

**Total Power (A) of Personnel Selection Criteria
Used by All Respondents**

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>A</i>
1. Attitude	56.6
2. Enthusiasm	55.5
3. Honesty	55.5
4. Dedication	52.8
5. Competence	51.6
6. Loyalty	44.5
7. Intelligence	39.0
8. Experience	35.5
9. Education/Knowledge	28.0
10. Personality	18.5
11. Appearance	18.0
12. Initiative/Motivation	11.5
13. Communication Skills	11.5
14. Maturity	10.3
15. Reliability	10.0
16. Work History	8.5
17. Abstinence from Drugs	8.0
18. Physical Strength	7.5
19. Potential	7.0
20. Age	3.0
21. Residence (Rural vs. Urban)	3.0
22. Salary Requirements	3.0
23. Punctuality	3.0
24. Persistence	2.0

Espoused or Posted Personnel Selection Criteria

The espoused or posted selection criteria are those that managers (and others) will include in advertisements of job openings, post on job boards, record in statements of company policy or openly identify when asked

about the criteria they use in selecting personnel. These espoused selection criteria are usually discovered by analysing job advertisements, interviewing managers or asking managers to write down these criteria in response to an item on a questionnaire. The latter approach was employed in this study. On the last page of the research instrument used, respondents were asked to list five qualities, characteristics or qualifications they believe are most important for employees of their companies to possess. A limitation of this approach is that while it enables one to calculate the frequency with which criteria are used it does not allow one to directly measure the strength with which these criteria are mentioned. However, it may be argued that since these are espoused (and not necessarily operative) criteria a measure of strength is not necessary and that a measure of frequency is an adequate description.

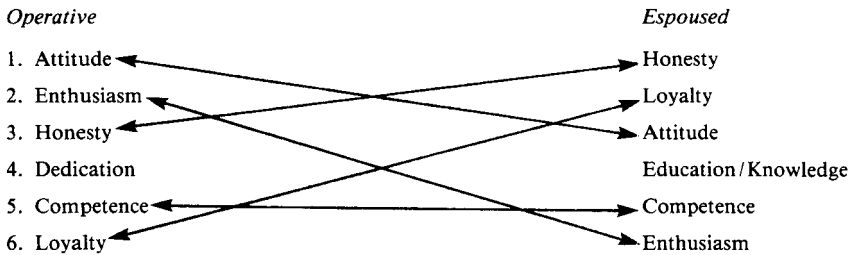
As shown in Table 5, «honesty» was the most frequently used criterion (26 times) followed by «loyalty» (21 times), «attitude» (18 times), «education/knowledge» (17 times) and «competence» (16 times). Since a particular criterion was only counted once per respondent this means that twenty-six of the forty-one respondents mentioned «honesty» as a personnel selection criterion, twenty-one mentioned «loyalty» and so on.

TABLE 5
Frequency of Use (f) of Espoused or Posted Personnel Selection
Criteria for All Respondents

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>A</i>
1. Honesty	26
2. Loyalty	21
3. Attitude	18
4. Education/Knowledge	17
5. Competence	16
6. Enthusiasm	16
7. Dedication	14
8. Intelligence	13
9. Experience	7
10. Personality	7
11. Initiative/Motivation	7
12. Appearance	5
13. Reliability	5
14. Maturity	4
15. Communication Skills	3
16. Need of Work	2
17. Punctuality	2
18. Problem Solver	1
19. Physical Strength	1
20. Health	1
21. Potential	1

Chart 1 examines the six leading operative criteria as measured by *total power* of selection criteria used by all respondents (see Table IV) in relation to the six leading espoused criteria as measured by frequency.

CHART 1
Operative vs Espoused Selection Criteria



CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the espoused and operative personnel selection criteria of managers of manufacturing firms. Responses to a projective test (derived from Kelly's Rep Test and Brown's Personnel Decision Analysis Form) were received from forty-one personnel managers of manufacturing firms in Windsor, Ontario. The projective test which elicited operative personnel selection criteria of the respondents formed the major part of the research instrument used in this study. A short questionnaire which was included in the research instrument sought demographic data and espoused personnel selection criteria.

The results of this study indicate that the most powerful *operative* personnel selection criteria of the respondents were attitude, enthusiasm, honesty, dedication and competence. The most commonly *espoused* personnel selection criteria for this group were honesty, loyalty, attitude, education/knowledge and competence. The clear indication is that for both types of criteria the most important qualities, characteristics or qualifications are subjective in nature. For example, a leading item in both the operative and espoused lists is «honesty». This is a highly subjective value — «honesty» means different things to different people. If «honesty» and other subjective values form the major personnel selection criteria of managers, as indicated in this study, then the conclusion might be drawn that the «best»

candidate is not always hired. Moreover, this subjectivity suggests that employers hire their employees not on the basis of qualifications but on the basis of perceived congruence of values. The matching in personnel selection therefore becomes one not of «person to job» but of «person to person».

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Critères opérationnels et critères favorisés de sélection du personnel chez les dirigeants d'entreprise

Cet article s'intéresse à deux catégories de critères de sélection du personnel: les critères opérationnels et les critères favorisés. Les critères favorisés sont ceux à qui les dirigeants d'entreprises disent à qui veut les entendre qu'ils y recourent. Ce sont des critères dont on parle à tout venant. D'un autre côté, les critères opérationnels que les gens utilisent quand ils ont une vraie décision à prendre ne sont pas toujours les mêmes que ceux que l'on favorise. Dans le présent article, un test projectif (dérivé du *Rep Test* de Kelly et du formulaire analytique de décisions touchant le personnel de Brown) fut choisi pour illustrer et mesurer le poids des critères de sélection opéra-

tionnels tandis qu'un court questionnaire recueillait les données démographiques ainsi que les critères de sélection du personnel favorisés. Ces deux approches ont été insérées dans un seul instrument de recherche qui fut administré à 41 directeurs du personnel d'entreprises industrielles de Windsor en Ontario.

Les résultats de cette étude démontrent que l'âge et le degré de scolarité influencent le poids des critères opérationnels utilisés par les répondants. Les données révèlent un rapport (significatif à un degré de .05) entre le poids des critères opérationnels et l'âge des directeurs. Plus ceux-ci sont âgés, plus ils favorisent les critères opérationnels. On a aussi trouvé un rapport (significatif à un degré de .05) entre le poids accordé aux critères opérationnels et le degré de scolarité des directeurs de personnel, les diplômés d'université encourageant des critères opérationnels plus forts.

Les résultats démontrent aussi que les critères de sélection du personnel opérationnels les plus utilisés étaient le comportement, l'enthousiasme, l'honnêteté, le dévouement et la compétence. Les critères de sélection du personnel favorisés les plus communément retenus dans ce groupe étaient l'honnêteté, la loyauté, la formation, le savoir et la compétence. Il y a indication manifeste que, pour les deux types de critères, les sujets les plus importants sont de nature subjective. Si les valeurs subjectives constituent les principaux éléments de sélection du personnel parmi les directeurs, comme les résultats de cette enquête semblent le démontrer, la conclusion que l'on peut en tirer, c'est que le meilleur candidat n'est pas toujours embauché. De plus, cette subjectivité laisse deviner que les employeurs engagent les travailleurs, non pas en tenant compte de leurs qualifications, mais selon la conformité des valeurs perçues. En conséquence, l'appariement en matière de sélection du personnel devient, non pas un ajustement de la «personne à l'emploi», mais une relation de «personne à personne».

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