

**The Electronic Hiring Hall:
changes in job/candidate search practices in the Early Silicon Age**

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Abstract:

The rapid spread of corporate intranets and the explosion of personal computers since 1993 has rapidly changed the face of job search activities. While initial activities on the Internet derived from "common practice", recent changes in Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS), software programming, and the power of personal computers have caused a radical change in job search/ employee search activities. In this paper I discuss the co-development of job search/candidate search practices in recent years.

1 Introduction

For the past two centuries, individuals have tended to define themselves by their employment situation. An individual's job has provided not only much of their self image, but also access to many of the resources that allow them to define themselves as part of a community and, hence, part of a distinct culture (cf. Trice, 1993; Trice and Beyer, 1992; Bridges, 1994). In addition, for the past century or so, organizations have acted as the main forum for integrating different occupational cultures into (relatively) coherent, purposive social units. In part, this has been managed through an increasingly bureaucratic approach to the definition of organizational social roles (cf. Weber, 1947).

This integration has produced certain characteristic organizational cultures based around a specific social contract wherein loyalty to and conformity with the expectations of the organization are exchanged in return for security (cf. Whyte, 1956; Kalleberge,

Knoke and Marsden 1995; Bennet, 1990; Grossman, 1988; Morin, 1991; Tyrrell, 1994, forthcoming). However, changes in the very nature of organizational bonds, especially communicative bonds, have lead both to accusations of betrayal, and to changes in the *de facto* social contract. These changes have had a significant impact on both job search and candidate search (recruitment) activities. The purpose of this paper is to map out several of these changes and show the factors leading to them.

2 The social role of job and candidate searches

In most of the literature dealing with job-search, there has been little emphasis placed on recruitment issues and vice-versa (e.g. Schwab, et al, 1987; Saks, 1994; for an exception, see Nicholson, 1987). This situation, to my mind, has lead to an unnatural decoupling of what is, in fact, a set of complementary processes: job-search strategies rely on implicit models of recruitment and recruitment strategies rely on implicit models of job-search strategies.

If we view the two processes as different facets of a larger process of social placement then we both improve our analytic models and, at the same time, bring an emergent situation in line with previously studied processes operating in other cultures.¹ Any conceptual combination of the job/candidate search processes must start from two basic observations. First, these processes only operate in cultures that do not overtly prescribe social roles for their members and, by corollary, where individual organizations are relatively free to choose their members. In other words, in order for a search to exist,

¹ This argument implicitly assumes a model of social processes that emerge from previous historical models and levels of less complexity. For more on this, see Tyrrell (1996a, forthcoming).

there must be a requirement for it to exist. The second observation flows from the first: search processes will be increasingly complex, and with a tendency towards the chaotic, in proportion to the degrees of freedom of the search parameters.

The basic "problem" behind the emergence of both job-search and candidate search strategies may be stated simply as "how do people end up being and doing what they should be and do?". How a given culture interprets the three concepts of "being", "doing", and "should", defines, in part, the "openness" of the search parameters.

Cultural interpretations are not the sole factors that determine these parameters. Over the past hundred years it has become obvious that technological innovations and environmental conditions play at least as significant a role. Consider, by way of example, the redefinition of "should" that happened during the First and Second World Wars regarding the "proper" role of women in North America.²

3 The Late Industrial Age

The era from the end of World War I until the late 1960's, the Late Industrial Age, was characterized by certain key cultural interpretations of "being", "doing" and "should". Access to most of the social roles under the heading of "work" was fairly strictly controlled by a number of means. Despite the cultural icon status of Rosie the Riveter, there is no doubt that women's access to specific jobs and professions was quite strictly controlled by cultural norms. At the same time, male access to specific jobs and

² In the following sub-sections, the terms "Early Industrial Age" (~1760-1860), "Middle Industrial Age" (~1860-1914), "Late Industrial Age" (~1914-1980), and "Early Silicon Age" (~1968 to the present) are used to distinguish broad temporal and organizational categories. They derive from the convention of archaeology "stages" established by C.J. Thomsen in 1819, although actual dates are impossible to establish, since practices from one "age" continue into the next (for parallel arguments, see Barley and Kunda (1992) and Eastman and Bailey (1998)).

professions was also controlled by a combination of professionalization (i.e. required cultural capital) and enculturation (cf. Willis, 1977). At the same time, the later half of this period was also characterized by what can only be described as a "loyalty for security" social contract (see above).

For most of the Late Industrial Age, say up until the mid 1970's, job-search strategies consisted of two main types: credentialization³ and networking. Credentialization strategies centered on matching predefined candidate search requirements in such areas as degrees, work experience, and "bare-bones" resumes and matching these with formal candidate search procedures. Networking strategies still required appropriate credentials, but relied on additional opportunity information via personal and professional networks. In short, they took advantage of informal candidate search procedures.

4 The Early Silicon Age

The late Industrial Age has been characterized by a number of trends in three general areas. First, there has been a generalized replacement of human with machine labour. Second, the cognitive and operational environments (Rappaport, 1968:237-242) of most large organizations have been extended to encompass the entire globe and low Earth orbit. Third, there has been a centralization and intensification of C³ functions (Command, Control, and Communications) and, in many cases, a shifting of these functions from humans to digital technologies (e.g. expert systems).

³ On the rise of credentialism, see Buon (1997).

The current culmination of these trends, the Early Silicon Age, is characterized by several key structures. First, the productive capacity of the Late Industrial Age sectors of the economy far exceeds the possible demand, while this situation is reversed in the service and information/knowledge intensive sectors of the economy (cf. Rifkin, 1994). This can be seen in the rapid development and growth of the so-called “high technology” sectors: computers, robotics, bio-technology, and precision instrumentation (Beck 1992). It can also be seen in the chronic labour shortages currently reported in these sectors.

Second, the destruction of trust in the bureaucratic organizational forms and the social contracts of the Late Industrial Age have produced a situation of generalized uncertainty for both the employee (i.e. "how long will I work here?") and for the employer (i.e. "how can I keep my good employees?"). Rather than trusting organizations, the newly developing social contract places trust in the communities and personal networks over the organization and can be characterized as operating on reciprocity (Tyrrell, 1995; see also Sahlins, 1972; Mauss, 1990).

Third, the development and deployment of rapid, interactive communications technologies (especially EDI, the Internet, and Intranets) has produced new environments which give many people unprecedented access to specialized communities of interest. While these electronic communication networks are by no means the only new forms of community, they are amongst the most readily observable and accessible, and are having an effect similar to that of the introduction of the printing press (cf. Nicolli, 1990; Ong, 1982; McLuhan, 1962).

5 Characteristics affecting search parameters in the Early Silicon Age

The intersection of a new social contract centered on reciprocity, coupled with the rapid deployment of electronic networks, has produced a situation that is unique: humans in the Early Silicon Age have access to more resources and communities than ever before. Furthermore, investments in time (e.g. travel, research, etc.) are significantly reduced, while there has been a concomitant rise in the variety of resources that are accessible.

5.1 Changes in job search parameters

Unlike many pre-industrial cultures, the action of acquiring a livelihood (a job in our present society) has separated out from kinship and local spatial community. And, unlike the organizations of the late Industrial Age, acquiring a livelihood has separated from individual organizations and now takes place in multiple organizations on a contingent basis (i.e. term and contract employment, job shifting, consulting, etc.).

Job finding clubs, outplacement programs, and self-help groups for job seekers fall into the category of contingent communities (Tyrrell, 1998). First, the contingency of being unemployed is well recognised and expected within our culture. Second, these clubs, groups and programs contain a small number of professional counsellors, a somewhat larger number of “alumni” and, usually, a very large number of unemployed participants. Third, there are clearly recognised affective and material resources transmitted.

At this point in time, there are a number of options available in order for a person to generate an income. While the most common option is still employment by an organization, there are others such as self-employment (as a consultant or entrepreneur), contract or temporary work, and franchise opportunities. Each option contains its' own specific components; the most common of which are opportunity identification, opportunity

research, and specific job-search skills (e.g. networking, interviewing, and researching; cf. Tyrrell, 1995), all of which are accessible in cyberspace.

While cyberspace is still primarily conceived of as an adjunct to “real space” job-search communities (i.e. formal outplacement programs, etc.), there are indications that a job-search function has developed in many online communities. In addition, it is apparent that a number of online communities have developed centred around job searching.

Specific job-search sites have operated on the Internet since the mid 1980’s - primarily in the form of Usenet newsgroups and Bulletin Board Systems. Many of the descendants of these sites operate as an adjunct to specific communities of interest, e.g. job opportunities posted to a list serve. In several instances, they have migrated to the World Wide Web (WWW) and, in the process, generated a number of dedicated job-search sites.

All of the major job search sites on the WWW contain information on opportunity identification, opportunity research, and job search skills training. What distinguishes between these different structures is a) the form of resource presentation, b) the functional focus of the site, and c) the technology used in the production of the site. In general, we can distinguish between three main types of structures: resource structures, opportunity structures, and "community" structures.

Resource structures are devoted to either the production or distribution of job search resources. Many of the earliest resource structures on the WWW were referred to as "gateway" sites, since they were built around large collections of URL links. One of the earliest (February, 1994) of the general resource sites was the Riley Guide which is still the definitive resource for online job searching. Resource sites do not, however, have to be

collations of information: many of the most important job search resources are solitary works (e.g. Agre, 1994).

Opportunity sites are the direct descendants of the BBS job posting sites. With the advent of interactive, web-based databases, these sites have developed into major resources for job seekers. One key point concerning these sites is that they are designed to act as a neutral interface between the job seeker and potential employers. As such, they may be considered to be analogically equivalent to "ports of trade" (Polanyi, 1977). Most opportunity sites have parallel structures, one for job seekers and one for potential employers (e.g. Monster.Com).

The increase in interactivity stems from the deployment of new programming standards for the HTML language, coupled with the availability of highly interactive programming scripts (e.g. cgi scripting, Java, and UML) and simplified programming interfaces (e.g. Hotdog, MS Frontpage, etc.). It has not only increased the interactivity of Web sites and their ease of production, but also lead to the development of Web pages that combine asynchronous and synchronous sites.

This combination of asynchronous and synchronous media into a single settlement is currently forming the basis for several communities of job seekers. Where the territory of a given cyberspace community used to be defined by a single site and that sites' links to other sites, we now find the development of full fledged, if specialised, settlements. Some of these, such as iVillage, involve the use of chat, web, database and list-serve technology.

A second development of interactive programming technologies has been the deployment of desktop meta-search engines that operate off an individual's personal computer. Two particular meta-search engines are of direct relevance for job seekers:

Wanted Jobs 98, which searches 20 different job banks, and BusinessVue for general corporate research. The particular relevance of these two programs stems from two sources. First, they are "freeware", readily available for download with no cost to purchase or use. Secondly, these program may be made readily available in "real world" communities so that people who otherwise do not have access to Internet job opportunities are able to access them. The requirement to access the Internet is only going to increase, given the current rush of companies to use it as a source of recruitment.

5.2 Changes in the candidate search

The interregnum of restructuring, mergers, and acquisitions flowing through the collapse of the Late Industrial Age social contract marked the development and spread of radically new job-search technologies (cf. NFB, 1981) and, in Canada at any rate, a common-law insistence on corporate responsibility (cf. Grossman, 1984, 1988). This period, which crystallized around 1982 in Canada, also marked a change in candidate search practices both as the new job-search practices spread and as Human Resources (HR) departments became swamped with resumes.

As with many corporate functions, HR increasingly came under pressure to cut costs. In part, this cost-cutting pressure was met by an increasing use of computers not only a record keeping devices, but also as report production devices and to handle compensation, training, skills inventories, and recruitment (cf. Glueck, 1978:17-18, 121-122, 167). The advent of relatively inexpensive mini-computers in the early to mid 1970's had spread the practice of computerizing many Human Resource Management (HRM) practices to a broad range of organizations who had previously been unable to own a mainframe.

The computerization of HR functions was not the only cost cutting measure available. A number of studies examining the effects of different sources of recruitment had clearly shown that informal sources of recruitment tended to produce candidates that had a lower turnover and a better "fit" than recruitment through more formal channels (see Saks, 1994 for a review). Informal recruitment sources (i.e. personal networking by candidates) were not only less expensive than more formal processes but also dovetailed nicely with the emphasis on networking in the new job-search practices (e.g. Bolles, 1993; Morin, 1991).

The period from the early 1980's to the early 1990's was marked by increasingly desperate job-search tactics. Anecdotal evidence abounds amongst HR managers, temp recruiters and others about the increasingly innovative tactics developed by job searchers in order to catch hiring managers' attentions (see, for example, Jackson, 1991 [1978]). During the later half of the 1980's and into the early 1990's, informal networking techniques expanded into the newly emerging bulletin board systems (BBS's) that were spreading throughout North America. BBS's provided not only job opportunities but, more importantly, access to information about projects, companies and future opportunities.

At the same time, HR cost-cutting pressure was interacting with newer computer technologies, primarily OCR scanning software and web development, to produce an environment where HR became the driving force behind many corporate web sites (Doran, 1996). These pressures reached their critical point in the 18 months between January of 1995 and July of 1996. From the HR side, the deployment and use of web

based recruiting material offered significant benefits in terms of costs, time, reach, and "formalism".

The cost advantages for HR can be illustrated with just two examples. Silicon Images reported that in 1996 they saved \$70,000 *per day* in paper costs related to recruiting (Doran, 1996:2), while the cost of posting a job ad to Monsterboard is 5% of posting the same ad to a major newspaper.

Most of the advice on Internet recruiting suggests that employers use more than just the opportunity sites. One of the major consulting groups in Internet recruiting, Austin Knight (KnightNet, 1999), argues that

third-party recruitment Web sites, print media sites and newsgroups are great choices for active job seekers, but that the high-level engineer looking for software-fixes or the CFO checking financial information is not likely to visit these sites. To attract the passive job seeker, the best response may be received by placing jobs on your company's own home page or by utilizing Listservs. It is also important to keep in mind that the Internet is a dynamic medium, and that utilizing links, rather than duplicating information, is often the most cost-efficient method of distributing information across a wide area.

This strategy has been used by a number of HR recruiters I have talked with, although they emphasise that it can only be used to fill high level positions given the time involved. Much of the shift towards Internet-based recruiting concerned not only the revisioning of HR and the ability to cut costs, but also the utility of recruiters to find appropriate candidates and keep abreast of current issues (cf. Doran, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997d). List-serves, the descendents of BBS's, have been used both by HR professionals and by job-searchers as ways to gather information, keep abreast of developments, and obtain job/candidate leads (Doran, 1997c, 1997d; Tyrrell, 1996b), and similar use is made of some dedicated chat rooms.

The ability to formalize the recruitment process mirrored the formalization of the Late Industrial Age, but placed the emphasis on skills and competencies rather than on specific credentials. In part, this stemmed from the recognition of the need to create "learning cultures" within the workplace in order to stay competitive. At the same time, there was a recognition that degree based certification was insufficient to guarantee the necessary skills, since the half-life of most high tech skills is measured in months rather than decades.⁴

The return to formalism was also necessitated by an increasing recognition that resume fraud was rampant in both the United States (Bachler, 1995) and Canada (Doran, personal communication). In a number of cases, the development of the Internet has been blamed for the spread of resume fraud (e.g. Menefee, 1998); a situation that struck at the heart of Web-based recruiting. Over the past several years, manufacturers of Human Resources Information Systems (HRIS) have produced a variety of products claiming to extract skills from resumes (e.g. Resume Assistant) or to provide a clear picture of competencies (e.g. SkillScape). In a few areas, the skills can actually be examined in a formal, web-based testing system (e.g. MedHunters and SkillScape; see Doran, 1988), but most of the systems are, at present, reminiscent of creating role-playing gaming characters with particular attributes and skill levels.

6 The evolution of search communities

The deployment of digital HRIS operations coupled into the Internet, and the development of major job listing boards increases the importance of timely information both

⁴ This recognition, in turn, was behind the redefinition of competencies away from skills and the growing

for job-seekers and recruiters. This, in turn, stimulates the "need" for access to specialised communities for technical skills (e.g. "How do I post my resume?"), for opportunity and candidate identification, and for increased participation in search communities where these resources are available.

All of these factors combine to produce a multiplicity of contingent communities that contain information resources. Most of these communities are outside of the control of any single organisation: they exist both in the spaces between organisations and as collections of rapidly shifting individual locations. At the same time, they both enhance organisations and serve as a way of detaching individuals from organisations first by showing them other options and then by enhancing the emerging social contract.

As with any community, however, there are problems. One of the most frequently discussed is that of resume fraud. While Doran (personal communication) predicts that resumes will disappear, I am not so sure. In many ways, resumes are still too useful a tool: if not for candidate selected, then for the elimination of candidates both during the recruiting process and after a hire if it can be shown that they lied on their resumes. I suspect that the courts in both Canada and the United States, which uphold the concept of wrongful dismissal for resume fraud, would not extend that "protection" to cover candidates who successfully pass formal corporate competency testing procedures.

formalization of interpersonal and emotional competencies.

From the job-search side, resumes still make a lot of sense, at least if they are used in their fullest. According to most manuals,⁵ the production of the resume is an end in and of itself: a course of self-assessment as well as the production of a necessary job-search tool. For many recruiters as well, the crafting of a resume gives initial insights into the character of candidates even before an interview (Patterson, 1997). Finally, most of the current and projected HRIS software still relies on the existence of a resume, even if their use is limited.

While it was quite feasible for people to talk about "formal" and "informal" methods of recruitment in the Late Industrial Age, such a distinction is much less relevant at the present time. Recruiters expect candidates to know more about their companies (cf. Hergenrather, 1998), a trend that was an essential component of the new job-search strategies. This "informal" knowledge gathering is now coupled in with web-based recruiting, for example the news articles on companies tied to job listings on the Globe and Mail's site.

This shift towards the Internet for job/candidate searching has reset the parameters of searches. In *When Work Disappears*, Wilson (1996) noted that certain economic and spatial considerations had changed the job/candidate search, at least as far as inner cities in the US was concerned. What was not covered in his analysis, since it was not prominent during the time of his research, is the para-spatial effects of shifting job/candidate searches to the Internet.

⁵ This is based on manuals gathered from the major outplacement companies in Canada during the course of my Ph.D. fieldwork and on interviews conducted with various counselors. Similar arguments can be found in Bolles (1993), Snodgrass (1996), and other published manuals.

As we all know, access to Cyberspace is not governed as much by geography as it is by a combination of skill, access to equipment, and knowledge of where to look and how to act. And, while this realization is behind current federal attempts to increase access, there are still certain issues that have not been addressed; in particular the requisite time and skill needed to establish a 'Net presence (see Tyrrell, 1996a, 1996b), and the requirement for multiple forms of job-search tools. I want to examine this last issue in some detail.

The development of email, OCR scanners, and web-based application systems has been a boon for HR departments, at least in as much as it automates the initial cuts on candidates through automation. For the job-searcher, on the other hand, it had added in another barrier. Rather than having one major resume that can be tailored for individual jobs, job-searchers are now required to have at least two, if not three or more, different base resumes on hand at all times.

This requirement is an artifact of the technology used to import resumes into HR databases. The minimum requirements are a print version of the resume and a text (.txt) version suitable for email submission, and for the "cut-and-paste" forms of a number of online applications (e.g. Consumers Gas, Canadian Tire, etc.). If the job-searcher wishes to have any kind of an edge, they will also have to craft an electronic keyword resume, which may well differ drastically from their print version and must be tailored for each opportunity. In some instances, resumes are being put on web-pages (e.g. Hiring Bob).

All of this resume tailoring, to say nothing about opportunity identification and research, relies on constant access to both computers and to the Internet. Furthermore, having "a" computer is not adequate for most job-search activities. It is necessary to have

access to a computer and web browser that can support all of the latest "bells and whistles" that are coming to adorn various corporate and job-search sites and a connection that is fast enough to access these sites. At the time of writing, this means a minimum of a Pentium 100 with 16 MB of RAM and MS Explorer v3+ or Netscape v3+ and a connection rate of 14,400 kb/s.⁶

This accessibility issue may well create problems for HR departments in the future, since otherwise promising candidates may be at a disadvantage in applying for jobs. Furthermore, the very skills necessary to conduct successful job searches also produce international networks ("communities") that increase the likelihood of the candidate either leaving the organization voluntarily or being headhunted (Tyrrell, forthcoming). One possible solution may be the development of application kiosks for the general public, but that may not be economically feasible since it relies on a fixed spatial location.

7 Conclusions

It is currently quite clear that the shift of recruitment activities to the Internet will continue. While the situation is still fluid, mainly because of the rapid development of the technology, there are some clear implications for both HR professionals and job-searchers. First, any search strategy that does not include a web-based component is too limited to produce acceptable opportunities/candidates. Second, the shift to Internet recruiting/job-searching is acting as a preliminary "cut" of candidates based on a

⁶ This is the minimum requirement for accessing job-search sites. In order to have usable access, i.e. access that allows you to search out corporate information, interact with job-search sites, and construct an

constellation of computer literacy, time and access. Third, the pool of potential candidates has expanded to global proportions but, at the same time, the area of headhunting has expanded to the same proportions.

Throughout this paper, I have tried to show how the two systems of job search and candidate search are inextricably linked - an integrated process of social placement - even if the people involved in the process did not realize it.⁷ While questions of social placement are clearly culturally defined in part, I hope that I have also shown that their operational environments, both social and technological, also play a central role in this definition.

In several other papers, I have discussed the role of reciprocity in job-search strategies both in the “real world” (Tyrrell, 1995) and in Cyberspace (Tyrrell, 1996b). In these papers, I argued that there were distinct parallels between the distribution systems of hunting and gathering cultures and those of modern job seekers. The problem for most organizational cultures is that almost everyone in the organization from the C.E.O. down to the mail clerk is either engaged in an ongoing job-search or is subject to headhunting. Organisations have themselves become contingent communities, as can be seen in the development of a two-tier employment system in the United States where most new jobs are outsourced to temporary agencies (cf. Rifkin, 1994: 190-194).

appropriate 'Net persona, the requirements are more along the line of a Pentium 166 with 32 MB of RAM and a 56.6kb connection rate.

⁷ In some ways, this argument derives from the Malinowski's (1965[1935]) arguments concerning land tenure in the Trobriands. This is not surprising since I draw heavily on Malinowski in my work (e.g. Tyrrell, forthcoming).

One central point that many of us have forgotten is that all individuals are members of multiple communities. Even as the relative importance of our work communities is dropping, the importance of electronic and other networking communities is increasing. To paraphrase Durkheim (1984), we are moving from mechanical solidarity, through organic solidarity, to electronic solidarity where fragmented sets of communities replace aspects of both pre-industrial and Industrial communities. We have truly become hunters and gatherers of the Information Age.

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