



A survey of recruitment and selection practices in Egypt

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper's aims are to ascertain whether there is evidence of Egyptian organisations using recruitment and selection practices which are context specific and whether different practices are used for different job types; whether responsibility for recruitment and selection is shared between HRM specialists and line management; and whether there is evidence of increasing devolution of this responsibility to line managers.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected between May and July 2007 and produced 108 usable questionnaires. The questionnaire was adapted from the Price Waterhouse Cranfield project on HRM in Europe.

Findings – There is some evidential support for the influence of the Egyptian national context upon the practices used, with different practices, including the number of techniques being used for the recruitment and selection of different job types. There is evidence of substantial sharing of this responsibility with line management through consultation and of an increased devolution of responsibility to line management.

Research limitations/implications – Investigating recruitment and selection practices with the influence of ownership and by organisational size is needed to pursue whether there are significant associations between these variables.

Practical implications – Organisations moving into Egypt would not appear to be confronted with substantial resistance to the adoption of new methods and techniques for recruiting and selecting staff or the adoption of different methods for different job types, neither with resistance if they wish to involve line management in the decision-making process.

Originality/value – The influence of the Egyptian national context upon the recruitment and selection practices used is an important issue for organisations to know the best recruitment and selection methods.

Keywords Recruitment, Selection, Culture, Managers, Egypt, Human resourcing

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

In this paper, we report and analyse the findings of two surveys into the practice of recruitment and selection in Egypt. The particular focus is upon the methods used, whether different practices are used for different categories of staff, and the management responsibility for recruitment and selection. This research was undertaken in order to supplement the still fairly scant research evidence available concerning HRM practices in the Arab Middle East; including recruitment and selection practices (Budhwar and Mellahi, 2007; Leat and El-Kot, 2007) and to further inform the debate

concerning the influence of national context upon recruitment and selection practices in an era of globalisation and inward investment into developing countries.

Aycan *et al.* (2007) point out that globalisation accelerates the transfer not only of products and services among nations, but also of management know-how and practice. In identifying the recruitment and selection practices in use the study should also be of use to managers of expatriates and for companies investing into Egypt. Ryan *et al.* (1999) point out that in an era of globalisation it is important that multinational corporations know the extent to which particular HRM practices are universal or culture specific. Technological advances such as the internet also open up traditional practices to new influences and possibilities (Anderson, 2003).

The need to recruit and select staff is universal but while this need may be universal the way in which it is done, the particular methods favoured and their number may well be culture specific (Tayeb, 1995; Child, 1981; Hsu and Leat, 2000; Ryan *et al.*, 1999). In many developing economies, such as Egypt, contextually specific traditional practices are often opened up to foreign influence.

Literature review

Recruitment

The process of recruitment may begin with advertising vacancies, this may be done internally or externally or both and can be achieved using a range of media, which may involve using the company web site. The use of the internet for recruitment purposes has become very popular (Chapman and Webster, 2003; Carless, 2007; Anderson, 2003; Bartram, 2002; Lievens and Harris, 2003; Heneman *et al.*, 2000). However, Bartram (2002) and Anderson (2003) have identified the different level of technical sophistication found among organisations in relation to the use of new technology in selection. Alternative methods may be through spreading the word informally using existing employees, family members and other contacts and/or through the expanding use of outsourcing the activity to a firm of consultants or employment agency (Carless, 2007). Organisations may also make use of state run job centres or employment agencies or their own database of speculative enquiries.

Informal methods of recruitment have the advantage of being cheap and in relatively poor countries with a strong collective dimension to the culture a family or group dimension to the organisation facilitate control with the threat of family and friends displeasure acting as an informal control mechanism over employees once in post.

Harris *et al.* (2003) identify three main areas of country difference impacting recruitment; labour legislation, whether the labour market is internal or external and also the recruitment sources usually used. In countries where the labour market is internal, recruitment tends to focus upon specific entry points with appointment to more senior positions being from among existing employees utilising mechanisms of internal assessment.

Selection

Again there are a range of practices that may be used including: applications forms, curriculum vitae, one-to-one and panel interviews, psychometric testing, assessment centres, job trials, job specific aptitude or knowledge tests, graphology, group-based activities and references.

Research evidence supports a diversity of practice across national borders and the particular selection practices used, including the number, are likely to be influenced by

national factors including: the nature of labour legislation, the type of labour market, and the dominant model of selection as well as national culture, Levy-Leboyer (1994), Moscoso (2000) and Ryan *et al.* (1999). Moscoso (2000) concluded that the selection interview had probably been the single most used technique in most countries throughout the twentieth century. Harris *et al.* (2003) draw a distinction between countries in which an empirical predictive model is the norm for selection and those in which the selection system is designed to eliminate unnecessary risk.

The relevance of job type

Intuitively one might expect diversity in the use of recruitment and selection practices for different types of jobs, with different techniques, emphasis and combinations being used for example for the recruitment and selection of managers compared to manual workers and this has been confirmed in a number of studies, for example; Hsu and Leat (2000) and Harris *et al.* (2003).

Number of techniques used

Ryan *et al.* (1999) investigated national variations in the number of selection methods used and found that cultures high in uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1984) used more test types, used them more extensively, conducted more interviews and audited their processes to a greater extent. Evidence, they concluded, that such cultures exhibit a greater desire for objective evidence upon which to base their selection decisions.

Devolution of responsibility for recruitment and selection

One of the issues that has been of interest to researchers in recent years (Brewster and Larsen, 1992; Brewster *et al.*, 1997; McGovern *et al.*, 1997; Hsu and Leat, 2000; Budhwar, 2000; Budhwar and Sparrow, 2002) is the devolution of responsibility for HRM; including that of recruitment and selection, to line management. It has been suggested, particularly perhaps in the UK and the USA, that as HR specialists became more involved in and with the formulation of business strategy responsibility for the implementation of HRM should increasingly be devolved to line management.

However, Budhwar and Sparrow (2002) acknowledge there is relatively little evidence of the devolvement in particular being put into practice. We do need to bear in mind that the extent of devolution may give an indication of line-management preferences as well as HR managers' preferences. Hsu and Leat (2000) point out that one might expect line managers to want to be more concerned in decisions relating to the staff working directly for them.

Egypt

Egypt is a developing economy with a growing population, relatively high unemployment, low-education levels and skills shortages in the developing sectors of the economy. The labour market is regulated with a number of requirements and restrictions affecting the contents of employment contracts, the length of probationary periods, fixed term contracts and also upon dismissal. However, as yet, recruitment and selection is not subject to legislation encouraging equality of opportunity and seeking to prevent discrimination, though there are some restrictions upon the employment of foreign nationals.

The socio-cultural context is a blend of Arab, Islamic and Middle Eastern influences. Hofstede (1984) identified Arab speaking countries as demonstrating high-power distance, strong uncertainty avoidance, low individualism and moderate masculinity. The opening up of the country to more western influences through inward investment and an increase in the influence of western educational and management systems as students have travelled may well have encouraged change in the dominant value systems, Nydell (1996) and both Rahmati (2000) and El-Kot and Leat (2002) found some evidence of a shift in the direction of masculinity and individualism. Nevertheless, a number of studies have also found evidence variously supporting Hofstede's conclusions (Al-Faleh, 1987; Nydell, 1996; Parnell and Hatem, 1999; Leat and El-Kot, 2007). Parnell and Hatem (1999) also pointed out the importance of relationships over the task, loyalty to the group and friendship as a cornerstone of Egyptian culture and suggested that nepotism was common in recruitment and promotion practices.

Leat and El-Kot (2007) concluded that the influence of Islam is generally consistent with Hofstede's original findings and concluded that the Egyptian national socio-cultural and religious context implied that organisations would make use of the internal labour market where possible for recruitment and promotion and the importance of friendship identified by Parnell and Hatem would lead one to expect that recruitment by word-of-mouth and referral would also be common.

However, the shortage of necessary skills, the legislative restrictions upon temporary employment contracts and lawful termination and the influence of western management models and practices might well mitigate these traditional preferences encouraging the use of more formal external means of attracting candidates and there may be more emphasis upon tests of aptitude and vocational qualifications in selection. Ryan *et al.* (1999) thought that a strong desire to avoid uncertainty would encourage the use of multiple methods in selection, however, their findings did not support this.

Leat and El-Kot's research did not examine recruitment and selection practices in detail but they did find a marginal preference for filling vacancies from within and also that job skills were more important than fit with organisational culture in making selection decisions, this latter being more consistent with conditions in the labour market and the economic and legislative context than the socio-cultural.

Hofstede's data might lead us to expect Egyptian organisations to be centralised in decision-making terms with relatively little power sharing or devolution of decision making to line management, however, it may be, as Hickson and Pugh (1995) and Sadler Smith *et al.* (2003) identified, that there is more consultation and involvement of line management if the influence of Islam is strong and consultation is seen as a means of avoiding uncertainty and overcoming obstacles.

Aims of the study

- To ascertain whether there is evidence of Egyptian organisations using recruitment and selection practices which are context specific.
- To ascertain whether different recruitment and selection practices are used for different job types.
- To ascertain whether responsibility for recruitment and selection is shared between HRM specialists and line management and whether there is evidence of increasing devolution of this responsibility to line managers.

Method*Samples and procedures*

The organizations were chosen based on a purposive sample and only organizations with a human resource department were invited to take part. A questionnaire was used as a data collection method. Data were collected in two stages, Study 1 was conducted between May and August 2005 and produced 56 usable responses and Study 2 was conducted between May and July 2007 and produced 52 usable responses. Sample 1 consisted of 35 organisations engaged in manufacturing and 21 operating in the service sector, and sample two comprised 23 manufacturing and 27 in services. The questionnaire used was distributed to respondents, HR professionals, in their work place and collected back from them by one of the researchers. The questionnaires used were adapted from the Price Waterhouse Cranfield project on HRM in Europe.

Findings*Recruitment methods*

The results from Study 2 are not directly comparable with those from Study 1 given that the options in the question include web-based sources of recruitment, direct from educational institutes and the advertisement option is not separated into internal and external (Table I). However, there is widespread use of formal and informal as well as internal and external recruitment methods in both studies. Advertising and from among existing employees are the most frequently used recruitment methods. However, word-of-mouth remains popular and external consultants, web-based mechanisms and educational institutes were being used by substantial numbers of employers to fill vacancies.

Table I show the recruitment methods used in Study 1 and 2 with the rank of the most commonly used.

In both studies, the most popular method for recruiting managers is from among existing employees and this is not the case for any of the other categories of staff. For professional/technical and clerical staff the most popular method in both surveys is recruitment through advertising (Table II). However, in Study 1 the informal and internal mechanisms of recruiting from among current employees and by word-of-mouth are also reasonably widely used for both types of staff. In Study 2, there is significantly less use of recruiting from among existing employees for both these categories, indeed in Study 2 this is the least frequently used method for filling

Recruitment method	Study 1 (<i>N</i> = 56)		Study 2 (<i>N</i> = 52)	
	Frequency	Rank	Frequency	Rank
Advertise internally	42	3	42	1
Advertise externally	49	1		
From amongst current employees (internally)	46	2	42	1
Word-of-mouth	30	4	32	3
Use of recruitment agencies	29	5		
Use of search/selection consultants	21	6	38	2
Use of company web site	N/A	–	25	4
Use of commercial web sites	N/A	–	19	5
Use of educational institutes	N/A	–	25	4

Table I.

Table II.

Recruitment method	None	Managerial	Professional	Clerical	Manual	All
<i>Recruitment method by job type for Study 1 (N = 56 (frequency))</i>						
Advertise internally	14	17	20	14	21	10
Advertise externally	7	27	29	22	19	16
From amongst current employees (internally)	10	30	19	19	17	13
Word-of-mouth	26	12	13	17	18	10
Use of recruitment agencies	27	11	15	9	9	5
Use of search/selection consultants	35	10	10	6	4	3
<i>Recruitment method by job type for Study 2 (N = 52 (frequency))</i>						
Advertisement	10	17	27	16	12	10
From amongst current employees (internally)	10	34	4	5	7	3
Word-of-mouth	20	16	6	10	15	5
Use of recruitment agencies and search/selection consultants	14	19	20	10	13	8
Use of company web site	27	15	11	7	7	5
Use of commercial web sites	33	8	12	6	5	4
Use of educational institutes	27	9	15	9	8	4

vacancies for professional/technical and clerical staff. While, word-of-mouth is the second most common means used to recruit clerical staff it is considerably less commonly used for the recruitment of professional and technical staff. It is difficult to compare the studies in terms of the use of recruitment and selection agencies and consultants given that in Study 1 they were treated separately but together in Study 2, nevertheless it is worthy of note that in Study 2 this constitutes the second most popular method for all categories of staff, and more popular than advertising for both managerial and manual staff.

For manual staff, both surveys suggest the widespread use of both external and internal methods, for Study 1 the emphasis is upon advertising, word-of-mouth and current employees, whereas for Study 2 the emphasis shifts in the direction of the use of word-of-mouth and external agencies with less use of advertising and current employees.

The additional options offered in Study 2 demonstrate that web-based methods are used more frequently for managerial and professional jobs, as Harris *et al.* (2003) also found, and educational institutions were used more for the recruitment of professional and technical jobs than for other job categories. Organisations in these samples also tend to use a wider range of methods to attract managerial and professional/technical staff than they do for both clerical and manual jobs, this being more apparent in Study 2 than in Study 1. There is then evidence of different combinations of methods being used for the different categories of staff and also of differences between the two studies.

Selection methods

Clearly the results for Study 1 (Table III) indicate a dominance of three selection methods, application forms, an interview and the obtaining of references. The use of more empirical and valid predictors is very limited according to these responses with the regular use of aptitude and psychometric tests and assessment centres limited to less than 15 per cent of the respondent organisations in each case.

EBS 1,3	Selection methods		Used regularly	Not used	Rank
		Application forms		53	3
	Panel interview		53	3	1
	One-to-one interview		–	56	0
	Bio (CVs)		11	45	4
	Psychometric tests		8	48	5
	Assessment centres		6	50	6
	Graphology		2	54	7
	References		45	11	2
	Aptitude tests		8	48	5
	Group selection methods		15	41	3

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Table III.
Study 1 selection
methods used and its rank

Study 2 enables us to examine the extent to which different selection methods are used for different types of jobs. For managers the most commonly used selection methods are an interview, application forms and references, however, for the other job types this is not the case. For each of the other three job types, the most popular single method involves some form of psychometric or aptitude testing with well over half of the organisations using testing in order to select technical/professional, clerical and manual staff. Testing is particularly dominant for manual staff. Application forms and an interview are also reasonably common for professional and technical staff, but their popularity diminishes for clerical staff and this is even more the case for manual staff. It may of course, be that this declining use of the application form as we move from managerial through professional, clerical and manual staff positions is also a reflection of levels of literacy within the country (Tables IV and V).

Table IV shows the selection methods used in Study 2 for management and professional positions.

Table V shows the selection methods used in Study 2 for clerical and manual positions.

The evidence from Study 2 therefore suggests a degree of interaction between recruitment and selection methods and the type of job. Management jobs are most frequently filled from among current employees and the dominant selection method used is an interview. For the other job categories, the dominant recruitment method tends to be external, advertising, the use of agencies and for manual and clerical staff

Selection method	Study 2 (N = 52)							
	Management			Rank	Professional/technical			Rank
Yes	No	Do not know	Yes		No	Do not know		
Application forms	22	26	4	2	27	21	4	2
Panel interview	33	15	4	1	15	33	4	4
One-to-one interview	31	17	4	3	22	26	4	3
Psychometric tests	13	35	4	6	37	11	4	1
Assessment centres	14	34	4	5	15	33	4	4
Graphology	4	44	4	7	10	38	4	4
References	23	25	4	4	3	45	4	5

Table IV.

Table V.

Selection method	Study 2 (N = 52)							
	Yes	No	Clerical Do not know	Rank	Yes	No	Manual Do not know	Rank
Application forms	20	28	4	2	14	34	4	2
Panel interview	14	34	4	3	8	40	4	4
One-to-one interview	13	35	4	4	7	41	4	5
Psychometric tests	33	15	4	1	35	13	4	1
Assessment centres	4	44	4	5	5	43	4	6
Graphology	4	44	4	5	3	45	4	7
References	3	45	4	6	10	38	4	3

also word-of-mouth and the dominant selection methods for each of these job types are the use of some form of testing followed by application forms.

In looking at the number of selection methods used to select each of the different job types, it is clear that the responses indicate a greater range and number being used for the selection of the managerial and technical/professional staff compared with the clerical and manual staff.

Responsibility for recruitment and selection

The results are very similar in both studies (Table VI and VII). In both cases 48 per cent of the respondent organisations stated that primary responsibility rested with HR in consultation with line management, with 30 and 33 per cent, respectively, stating that it rested with line management in consultation with HR. In both studies, therefore approximately, 80 per cent of the organisations asserted that these decisions were to some extent shared between line management and HR but with the primary responsibility lying with HR in the majority of instances.

In Study 1, only a further question was asked concerned with whether line management's responsibility had increased or decreased in the preceding three years

Primary responsibility for recruitment and selection	Study 1		Study 2	
	Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent
No answer	2	3.6	—	—
Line management	4	7.1	5	9.6
Line management in consultation with HR dept.	17	30.4	17	32.7
HR dept. in consultation with line management	27	48.2	25	48.1
HR department	6	10.7	5	9.6
Total	56	100.0	52	100.0

Table VI.
Primary responsibility for recruitment and selection

Responsibility	Frequency	Per cent
Increased	26	46.4
Same	26	46.4
Decreased	4	7.1
Total	56	100.0

Table VII.
Responsibility of line management for recruitment and selection over the last three years

in relation to recruitment and selection. In almost half of the organisations line management's responsibility had increased with only 7 per cent indicating that it had decreased.

In summary, then the data indicates that HR retains primary responsibility in a majority of the organisations represented in the study, there is consultation between line management and HR in approximately 80 per cent of the organisations, and the responsibility of line management has been increasing in a substantial proportion of the organisations in Study 1 and only in a small number had it decreased in the previous three years.

Discussion

Recruitment methods

We noted in the literature review Tayeb (1995), Child (1981) and Hsu and Leat (2000) that while the need to recruit may be ubiquitous the particular methods favoured in any one country may be culturally relativist. We noted that in relatively poor countries with a strong collective dimension to the culture and where the desire to avoid uncertainty is also strong, as in Egypt, that internal and informal mechanisms of recruitment have the advantage of being relatively cheap, and mitigate uncertainty and ambiguity through prior knowledge and referral. Informal mechanisms such as word-of-mouth also have advantages in terms of maintaining a family dimension to organisations with the importance of friendship and relationships providing a means through which effective peer pressure can be used to exert control. Leat and El-Kot (2007), in their survey of HRM practices in a sample of Egyptian organisations, found a marginal preference for filling vacancies from within. However, we also need to take note of the conclusion of Aycan *et al.* (2007) that globalisation accelerates the transfer of management know-how and practices and it would not be surprising if inward investing corporations have brought with them foreign management practices.

The data presented in Table I lends some support to expectations that, in Egypt, there would be widespread use of both internal and informal recruitment practices. However, there is also evidence that external sources of recruitment are popular, with substantial proportions of the sample using external advertising, and outsourcing to recruitment agencies and selection consultants (Carless, 2007). There is also evidence of web-based recruitment becoming common (Anderson, 2003; Chapman and Webster, 2003). The mixed picture presented by this data may be reflective of organisations continuing to use traditional methods but also that when confronted with the need to be competitive, a poorly educated and relatively unskilled labour force, and labour and skill shortages they are ready to adopt new methods and technologies and also to use a range of methods. It may well be that some of the new methods and options have been introduced and encouraged by inward investment as well as by Egyptian managers having been abroad to study and train.

The data in Table II which identifies substantial variation of recruitment method by job type may also lend support to the tentative conclusion that these organisations are no longer relying on what may have been the traditional and culturally relativist methods. The evidence suggests that they may be adapting their recruitment methods to new economic, competitive and technical environments, taking on board new ideas and methods, and are choosing combinations of methods which they consider best suited to the particular job type and labour market conditions confronted. It may also

be that use of external expertise is another way in which organisations can reduce the uncertainty that they might otherwise feel recruiting externally and that the apparent increasing willingness to make use of such expertise should be seen in that light.

Selection methods/techniques

The results from Study 1 suggest that organisations in Egypt are using the same three methods which have been found to be popular in Europe, the interview, application form and references (Levy-Leboyer, 1994; Moscoso, 2000). However, Study 2 suggests that while this is true for managerial positions, it is not the case for other types of post.

The dominant method used for other posts is some form of testing. This may be evidence of a desire to use more empirically predictive techniques in a national context where there are skills shortages, levels of literacy are still relatively low, where labour legislation makes it difficult to employ on a temporary basis and to terminate employment and where there is a desire to avoid risk. This greater reliance upon testing for non-managerial positions may also be linked to the evidence that external sources, advertising, the use of agencies and word-of-mouth dominate the recruitment methods used to attract a pool of candidates for each of these job types. Ryan *et al.* (1999) found that cultures high in uncertainty avoidance did make more use of testing. In the case of managerial jobs, it may be that this risk is overcome by recruiting from within, use of the panel interview which involves more people in the decision making and by taking up references.

Where testing is the dominant selection method, a smaller number of selection techniques are used and some of the organisations within Study 2 would appear to use some form of testing as the only selection technique when recruiting clerical and manual staff.

Responsibility for recruitment and selection

The extent of consultation between line management and HR shown in our results appears consistent with the contributions of Sadler Smith *et al.* and Hickson and Pugh which point up the influence of Islam in encouraging cooperation and “wise” consultation as a way of avoiding mistakes and overcoming obstacles. The continuing dominance of HR, the experts, in terms of who has primary responsibility is also consistent with a desire to avoid uncertainty and error. However, the apparent increasing devolution of responsibility to line management may be indicative of the influence of globalisation and the transfer of western models and know-how (Aycan *et al.*, 2007). We discussed earlier that western models of HRM have encouraged devolution to line management as HR has become more strategic in its focus and given the advantages claimed by a number of researchers and summarised earlier by Budhwar and Sparrow (2002).

Practical implications

The practical implications of this research for organisations operating in Egypt are therefore that while there may still be a preference for both internal and informal means of recruiting, particularly for managers, there is also widespread use of external mechanisms for attracting candidates. Outsourcing to consultants, external advertising and the use of web sites all indicate that companies in Egypt are adopting practices common elsewhere and that they are responding to the new economic, competitive and

technological environments confronting them. There is little evidence to suggest that there is resistance to the adoption of new methods of attracting candidates and companies would appear to be free to use the techniques that they perceive to be the most appropriate to the job concerned and to the labour market environment.

Selection methods used also vary according to the job type. For managerial jobs there is still a preference for the three methods most popular in Europe, the interview, application forms and references. However, for other types of jobs these methods are less common and testing for aptitude and skills takes precedence.

The responsibility for recruitment and selection is shared between HRM professionals and line management with evidence of increasing devolution of this responsibility to line management. This is consistent with western models of HRM arguing a more strategic role for HRM within organisations, the advantages claimed for the involvement of line management, and with a desire on the part of line management to be involved in the decisions regarding the staff working directly for them.

Organisations moving into Egypt therefore would not appear to be confronted with substantial resistance to the adoption of new methods and techniques for recruiting and selecting staff or the adoption of different methods for different job types, neither are they likely to be confronted with resistance if they wish to involve line management in the decision-making process.

Further research

In this study, we did not investigate the influence of ownership and it may well be that the recruitment and selection practices and approaches being used by foreign owned organisations may be different from those used by those which are Egyptian owned. We also did not analyse the data by organisational size and it may well be as Hsu and Leat (2000) established that size is significant as an influence upon both the recruitment and selection techniques and approaches used and upon the devolution of responsibility for recruitment and selection decisions. The evidence obtained in this study that different practices are adopted for different job types suggests that more research is needed to pursue whether there are significant associations between these variables.

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