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## **“So test therefore, who join forever, if heart to heart be found together!”<sup>1</sup> – Decision, evaluation, and strategy in organizational processes of personnel selection**

### ***Introduction***

Using the example of personnel selection, this paper examines how decision, evaluation, and strategy are intertwined in organizations. They are part of a communicative process that, in the case of personnel selection, constructs the organizational fit of the applicant. Referring to the quotation in the title of this paper, personnel selection may not be directly comparable to the choice of a partner for a romantic relationship. However, some obvious parallels can be drawn between the two. Both cases, at least in many instances and by intention, involve a long-term commitment and both cases involve an assessment whether both parties reach the conviction that they are compatible with each other. In the case of a decision about a life together the assessment usually occurs before the decision for one another is taken: First one tests the compatibility, then one decides, and finally one stays together.

This holds true, according to widespread belief at least, for personnel selection as well. Organizations test, using elaborate procedures, which persons they deem suitable for a position, and then make a decision about the best candidate and offer them membership. Commonly, the testing of a candidate is viewed as being constituted by three distinct and situationally separated steps. First, candidates are observed regarding their abilities, knowledge, skills and other characteristics that influence their job performance, using a plethora of methods such as assessment centers or job interviews. Second, the candidates are evaluated based on generally accepted, measureable and stable criteria. This involves a review of the candidates' performances and a “prospective retro-diction” (Aradau and Blanke, 2017: 378), that is, an extrapolation from the candidates past to their future job performance. Finally, a choice among the candidates is made by a limited number of central actors, particularly from the human resource department and/or supervisory personnel. The internal and external legitimacy of this decision is produced by reference to the performance evaluation of the candidates, which depicts the decision of as a selection of the “best” candidate for the position. Whether

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Friedrich Schiller's *Song of the Bell* (1798).

this is an accurate depiction of organizational personnel selection processes is the topic of this paper. Specifically, we ask how personnel selections happen and how they achieve legitimacy within the context of the organization, by drawing on recent theoretical debates in the sociology of valuation and evaluation as well as the study of organizational decision-making.

The paper is organized as follows: First, we describe how the relationship between personnel selection, decision, and strategy is commonly conceptualized. Second, we elaborate on two forms of uncertainty identified in the literature on valuation and evaluation and how they relate to personnel selection. Third, we point to a gap in this literature, which so far has not studied how different moments of evaluation are connected to one another. Thereafter, the data and methods for our empirical research project are presented. Subsequently, we use an in-depth case study that highlights how the choice of a candidate is achieved in process linking several moments of evaluation. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings and suggest avenues for further research.

### ***Personnel selection, decision, and strategy***

The notion of personnel selection described above corresponds to a specific concept of organizational decision-making. In this view, decisions in organizations are the result of the interests of individual actors, who calculate the utility of certain alternatives based on their preferences (March, 1994). In this conception “organizational decision processes are described in essentially the same terms as individual decision processes, and research has often characterized organizations as being led by single powerful entrepreneurs (as in microeconomic theory) or by coalitions” (Brunsson, 1982: 30). Given their affinity to such a concept of decision-making (Brunsson, 1982: 29; Kohn, 1999: 14–15), it is perhaps not surprising that economic, management and psychological approaches dominate the research on personnel selection (Breaugh and Starke, 2016; Goldstein et al., 2017; Lussier and Hendon, 2019; Mathis et al., 2017; Schmitt, 2012). Thus, “personnel selection research largely occurs in a vacuum devoid of context, but personnel selection practice does not” (Ployhart and Schneider, 2012: 48).

The concept of decision-making as a deliberate choice, in turn, also corresponds to a specific notion of organizational strategy as the result of actors’ capacity to plan and implement their actions according to their own interests. In this manner, for example, the selection interview is described as “an exercise that involves a power contest between members of the interview panel itself” (Bozionelos, 2005: 1606). Thus, strategy is seen as different from decisions and rather as “a pattern in a stream of decisions” (Mintzberg, 1978: 935) resulting from the

deliberate negotiations of actors' interest and not seen as a practice shaped by organizational factors. Instead, "by isolating the actors, such schemes endow them with unlimited liberty and rationality and treat them as sovereign, rational agents freely negotiating over the conditions of their cooperation" (Crozier and Friedberg, 1980: 23). This perspective strategy and decisions sees them both as driven by individual actors and their interests.

However, decisions and strategies can be the result of actors' individual interests but they can also evolve out of the everyday organizational practices that mediate between actors and social structures, such as norms, rules, and interpretative patterns (Giddens, 1984). "Actors ... simultaneously engage in activities other than the decision in question" (Laroche, 1995: 63). In this perspective, decisions are the result of a social process involving several actors and in which sensemaking plays an equally or more important role than choice, as the actors structure the decision situation through action and interpretation (Laroche, 1995; March, 1988; Starbuck, 1983; Weick, 1995). Similarly, strategy can be viewed as ensuing from the interplay of actors and the organizational context, that is, in terms of strategy as part of everyday practice (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006) and not solely based on deliberate decisions (Mintzberg and Waters, 1990). Thus, "there is more to strategy-making than an addition or a chain of decisions" (Laroche, 1995: 66).

In the following, we show how decision, evaluation, and strategy are intertwined in organizations, using the example of personnel selection. Specifically, we show that evaluations of potential candidates are based on the organization's material and symbolic order and (re)produce it at the same time. Using data from an in-depth case study, the process of choosing an applicant is revealed as depending on a linkage of different moments of evaluation that are informed by situational as well as organizationally permeating factors. Via the analysis of an executive hiring process, we demonstrate how actors within moments of evaluation interact to create and attribute personnel decisions, which are on the one hand based on individual strategies and on the other hand embedded in the organization's interpretive patterns, norms, and rules.

### ***Personnel selection and (e)valuation***

#### *Evaluation and uncertainty*

Personnel selection is a fundamental and routine concern for all types of organizations, and choices regarding the hiring, promotion, or transfer of personnel are important factors in realizing organizational goals and fitness for the future (Cook, 2016; Sears, 2003). Organizations

do not hire persons at random; rather, “new members are chosen in the belief that they will benefit the organization” and these decisions are based, “if the organizational leaders are not too whimsical and impulsive, on some sort of assessment of the person” (Highhouse, Doverspike, & Guion, 2015, p. 4). Moreover, because individuals compete against each other for organizational positions with essentially zero-sum properties, personnel selection is conflict laden. Because these selection processes in most cases engender a rejection of candidates, they must be justified. Thus, personnel selection can be seen as a “critical moment” (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999: 359) requiring a specific legitimation based on the criteria used to evaluate and compare the candidates. This legitimacy is obtained by reference to the outcome of the evaluation of the candidates and the criteria used therein, which together frame the decision as a choice of the right candidate for the position.

The role of value assessment in recruiting personnel and legitimating the choice makes the *sociology of valuation and evaluation* (Beckert and Aspers, 2011; Kornberger et al., 2015a; Lamont, 2012) a suitable theoretical starting point for the study of personnel selection. Accordingly, the evaluation underlying the selection of a candidate is riddled with uncertainty in at least two respects. On the one hand, there is an informational uncertainty and on the other an uncertainty regarding the proper evaluative criteria (Aspers & Beckert 2011: 16). The first issue concerns the inaccuracy of information exchanged between the organization and the candidates. A fully informed decision is not possible due to the limited search and information processing capacities of the actors (March, 1994; March and Simon, 1993). Thus, this uncertainty concerns the classic “market for lemons” (Akerlof, 1970) problem that describes the difficulty of evaluating the quality of the candidates before they are actually hired for the job. The central issue is, therefore, how an organization can select a candidate without complete information on him or her (Karpik, 2010). However, even after a decision has been made, the uncertainty regarding the evaluation of the candidates may not be resolved definitively (Karpik, 2010: 11). Not only does such an assessment require evaluative criteria itself, but the potential performance of a different candidate can ultimately not be known.<sup>2</sup>

Besides the cognitive limitations of the actors (March and Simon, 1993: 157–192), there are also conflicting interests at play here that can motivate deception and result in the inaccuracy of information (Bangerter et al., 2012; Spence, 1973). Thus, from an organizational per-

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<sup>2</sup> Even though we are chiefly concerned with the organizational perspective here, it needs to be stated that the applicants do not possess complete information on the organization either, for example, their salary and other working conditions, as Granovetter’s (1974) work on the dissemination of information on vacant jobs revealed (see also Bangerter et al., 2012).

spective there is an interest “in accurately assessing applicants’ abilities and their commitment to the employment relationship,” while the candidates „may not be motivated to provide accurate information regarding these qualities unless it serves their candidacy” (Bangerter et al., 2012: 719). So, the uncertainty involved in personnel selection due to the information processing limitations is exacerbated by the issues regarding the accuracy of the information exchanged. Hence, “to hire someone ... is frequently to purchase a lottery” (Spence, 1973: 356). For this reason, organizations take great strides to conceal the uncertainty involved in personnel selection and legitimate their choices by appealing to specific criteria and procedures (Goldstein et al., 2017; see also Marchal, 2013: 109) as these choices are subject to challenges on various grounds, including discrimination (Dobbin, 2009).

The major contribution of the sociology of (e)valuation, however, concerns the second uncertainty involved in personnel selection. This uncertainty does not simply concern the issue of collecting as much information as possible on the candidates according to a predefined set of criteria. Instead, the uncertainty concerns the issue of what constitutes the quality of a candidate and how to interpret these attributes, that is, what are the appropriate standards and how are they to be applied. In the language of Boltanski and Thévenot, the organization is not merely concerned with the verification of a “state of worth” but rather the definition of an appropriate “order of worth” (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 133–134; see also Dansou and Langley, 2012), that is, a valuation scale that constitutes the quality of the candidates. The relevant criteria to assess the candidates are not automatically yielded by the vacant position, the matter of personnel selection itself, nor do the candidates qualities speak for themselves. Thus, personnel selection requires not only an “assessment of value” but a “production of value” (Vatin, 2013: 31). In practice, these two process of “valorizing” and “evaluating” are of course closely linked (see also Lamont, 2012: 205). Instead, as part of the selection process of the candidates, the organization has to determine, “what qualifies as quality” (Aspers and Beckert, 2011: 16).

Thus, personnel selection involves the development of a shared understanding regarding the determination and attribution of relevant qualities and an ordering of the applicants concerning their relative positioning in terms of these qualities (Aspers & Beckert, 2011, p. 17; Vatin, 2013). Previous research on (e)valuation has shown, that the two types of uncertainties can be dealt with by using “judgement devices” (Karpik, 2010), “qualification trials” (Callon et al., 2002: 199) or “trials” (Bourguignon and Chiapello, 2005). These social arrangements enable actors to identify and compare the quality of the objects in question. “The concept of

trial ... refers to the social arrangements organizing any testing of people's abilities resulting in arranging tested people in order" (Bourguignon and Chiapello, 2005: 669). These tests may be more or less institutionalized as in the case of expertise or rankings (Karpik, 2010) and involve specific technological devices (Callon et al., 2007). As part of personnel selection, such testing arrangements provide criteria to produce and comparatively assess the value of the candidates for the position offered.

However, in line with developments in the study of decision-making, there is a practice-oriented stream in the study of valuation as well. Accordingly, valuation is defined "as produced in ongoing practice. Such a practice-based view shifts attention to the specific everyday activities that constitute valuation processes and the outcomes generated as a result (Orlikowski and Scott, 2014: 869). Thus, different technologies and institutionalized arrangements may be involved in (e)valuation processes but there are "other valuation mechanisms that conduct the mundane work of bestowing value upon" (Kornberger et al., 2015b: 9) the respective objects in question. Crucially, these (e)valuations do not simply measure or reproduce a pre-existing value but rather constitute it through practices that selectively construct the object being assessed as possessing a certain value (Beckert and Musselin, 2013; Callon et al., 2002: 198–199; Hutter and Stark, 2015: 3; Kornberger et al., 2015b: 9).

#### *Moments of evaluation and uncertainty*

Yet, dealing with these uncertainties of valuation in the aforementioned way poses another problem. In the case of personnel selection, it is not only the subject matter, that is, the candidates' qualities, that are uncertain but also the evaluations generated in the selection process. This is true in several different respects. Callon and colleagues, for example, suggest that the entities being evaluated are subject to a "career" (Callon et al., 2002: 197–202), meaning that the valuations may change over time and as a function of the actors and devices involved in the selection process. The evaluated entities may undergo a continuous process of redefinition and revaluation. Consequently, one may assume that the evaluation of job candidates is not static, either; rather, the job candidates' "qualities are in flux" (Beckert and Musselin, 2013: 17) and change as a function of the actors, selection methods, and sequence of the selection process.

Additionally, there are uncertainties resulting from the application and interpretation of the evaluative criteria themselves. As Lamont (2009), in her study on the judgement of academic excellence, showed, the yardsticks for this quality can be defined and implement in various

ways. Even supposedly unbiased judgement devices like accounting techniques are dependent on the social context of their application (Mennicken and Power, 2015). Hence, evaluations exhibit “plasticity,” that is, they are “simultaneously stable and unstable” (Mennicken and Power, 2015: 210). Evaluations, including those of the candidates in personnel selection, may, therefore, manifest inconsistency, revisability, and volatility. The core question is then, how do some evaluation solidify, at least for a while, and gain legitimacy despite their variability?

This variability of evaluations has not been the main concern of previous research; however, it is central to the argument presented here. Much of the study of evaluations subscribes to a *methodological situationism* (Knorr-Cetina, 1981, 1988; Stark, 2009: 31–33), that is, it focuses on individual “moments of valuation” (Antal et al., 2015), that is, on “valuation taking place at a given site in a given moment” (Hutter and Stark, 2015: 4).<sup>3</sup> In engaging “valuation *in situ*,” (Stark, 2017: 390), this methodological program has been very effective in establishing research on the concrete practices actors use to ascribe values to entities (Hutter and Stark, 2015; Kornberger et al., 2015a; Muniesa, 2011). At the same time, it has been limited in its investigation of the instability of evaluations and the substantive and temporal interconnections between different evaluative situations. This concerns, on the one hand, how current situations refer to evaluations previously undertaken. On the other hand, it relates to the question of how different moments of evaluation are linked substantively, given the contingency of evaluation criteria and constellations (Jagd, 2011; Meier et al., 2016) across situations. So, while we generally share this approach, it has resulted in shortcomings regarding our collective understanding of the links between different moments of evaluation and the conceptualization of the relationships between different judgement devices, strategic actors, and organizational contexts.

Using the example of personnel selection, our paper explicitly focuses on the links between different moments of valuation and their embeddedness in organizational contexts. Different moments of evaluation are socially, substantively, and temporally linked to each other. The substantive and temporal linkage of these occasions of evaluation is neither linear nor are the employed devices and criteria interpretively stable. This means, that no robust patterns of evaluation develop. Instead, they are unconfirmed evaluations – “under reserve” (Wilke, 2016) –, whose chief property is their permanent revisability. Moreover, different social ac-

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<sup>3</sup> The demarcation of such valuation situations is handled differently in the literature. The approach cited here are inspired by American pragmatism and thus focus on “small-scale social situations” (Knorr 1981: 7), whereas the French pragmatic sociology uses a broader definition of situations that includes, for example, “historical constellations of institutional arrangements” (Diaz 2015:328). On the differences between the two approaches see Quéré & Terzi 2014).

tors are involved in these evaluative occasions to a varying degree and frequency. They employ different forms of strategic action to try and influence the moments of evaluation (Kornberger, 2017). However, as our empirical example shows, these individual strategies are constrained and channeled by the organization's interpretative schemes, norms, and practices in which overarching strategies are embedded. Thus, the valuations and the personnel selection are legitimized through the organizational context.

Based on empirical data from a personnel selection process involving highly qualified applicants for an executive position, we spell out organizational personnel selection as a process during which different provisional decisions and evaluations are connected and layered onto each other, leading to a final candidate.

### *Data and Methods*

The empirical data is part of a research project, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), into the personnel selection processes of large business firms. The goal of this study is to ascertain how procedures of personnel recruitment and the processes of evaluating and selecting executives are organized in major companies. The findings we would like to present here are based on an in-depth case study within this project. In a business firm in the field of automotive and mechanical engineering industries, several different business units as well as occasions and devices of personnel selection were examined. This included participant observation of an assessment center, evaluation meetings, and job interviews.

### *Data collection*

Our data collection methods adhere to the basic tenets of ethnographic field research. Therefore, the research follows its subject matter (the actors, artefacts, spaces and processes of the field; Marcus, 1995) and in this way entrusts itself to the logics of the field. As part of the field research, we conducted interviews, participant observations, and gathered documents.

To study how processes and practices of personnel selection are set up, we analyze the actors' interactions within the framework of local orders. Therefore, using problem-focused interviews, we surveyed the actors within the organization's interaction field about their work and the processes of personnel selection. Against this backdrop, we can reconstruct sequences of action as well as the individual and supra-individual rules, interpretations, and knowledge bases, which orient actors' actions. Simultaneously, documents were collected to describe organizational structures and procedures. These documents render clear factual circumstances



and expertise, written norms, formalized procedures and regulations as well as the organization's external presentation.

We conceive of personnel selection as a continuous process that is embedded within the activities of working and organizing. Hence, besides the interviews and the document analysis, we carried out participant observations in the HR and specialty departments of the organization under study. These observations were conducted over a period of approximately two years at intervals of varying length. In the course of this various types of data were collected (e.g. field notes, interviews, emails, and documents).

### *Data analysis*

All collected data was put into writing, anonymized, and analyzed by teams of researchers. Methodologically, our study is based on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss, 1987) as well as the principles of the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge (Hitzler et al., 1999; Reichertz, 2004; Soeffner, 1989). It holds that the implicit meaning of interview statements, artefacts, and observations can be reconstructed by means of the interpretations of the researchers. While the grounded theory methodology initially focuses heavily on the observable, the hermeneutic approach systematically establishes a stance of understanding and interpretation (Kaufmann and Wilz, 2019). Therefore, the combination of grounded theory and the hermeneutic approach facilitates a portrayal of organizational events on different levels: On the one hand, we can describe factual content, analyze the observable components of organizational practices and achieve a reconstruction of organizational processes. On the other hand, we can retrace the construction of meaning by the involved actors and shed light on the norms, interpretations, rules, and resources contained therein.

Hereafter, we discuss our findings with special emphasis on how strategies, evaluations and decision-making are connected to each other.

### ***Actors, Moments, and Strategies in the Hiring Process of the head of the HR department in B-Town***

At the center of our investigation is a hiring process for an executive position that was examined in full, that is, it includes the entire order of events from the vacancy to the filling of the position. Through the analysis of emails, job interviews, meetings, phone conversations, and a ranking of the candidates, we uncovered that the final decision for an applicant developed in a continuous process involving diachronic and synchronic evaluations of the applicants. More-

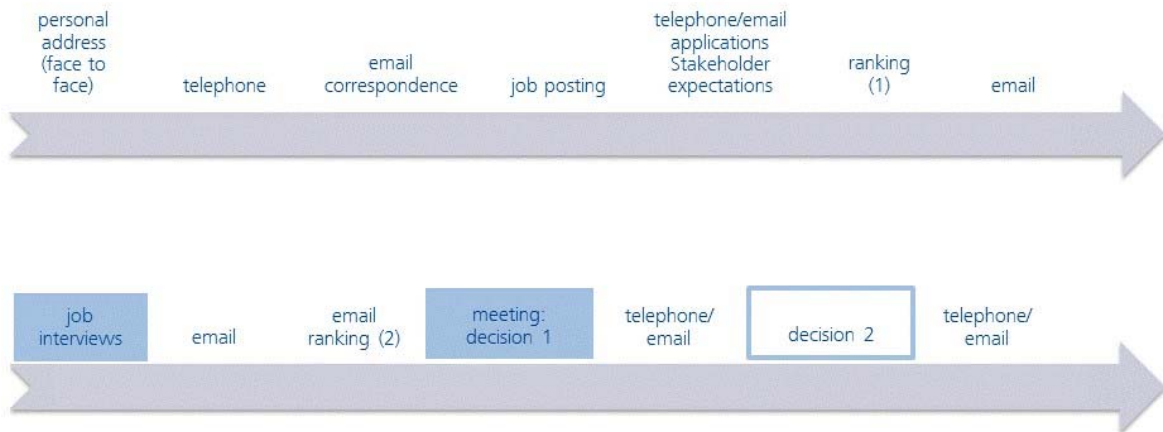
over, several different evaluative criteria were employed, whose definition, application to a person, and reference to each other were flexible. The evaluation of the candidates also utilized a combination of distinct evaluative devices, exhibiting different degrees of standardization. Additionally, several actors were involved in the selection process, some continuously and some sporadically. Consequently, accountability for the decision was dispersed among a number of actors. Thus, the main finding of the analysis is that actors, devices, and moments were linked in intricate ways to deal with the uncertainties of personnel selection. The decision for a candidate was not an isolated event or solely the result of strategic action by powerful actors but based on shared interpretations, social relationships, and “sensemaking” (Weick, 1995) through communication. Exactly how this process transpires is demonstrated in detail by our reconstruction of the exemplary personnel selection case.

Below, we briefly sketch how the process, which in total lasted about half a year, proceeded chronologically, which actors were involved, and which moments of evaluation and decision were to be found in it. As part of the analysis, we single out crucial moments of evaluation in order to show how evaluations are constructed and linked to each other: In terms of the definition of criteria, the ranking of candidates, the individual evaluations of the candidates and the communicative negotiation of evaluations during the meeting. Thereby, we can demonstrate, on the one hand, how actors discernably pursue strategies – and, on the other hand, how evaluations precipitate as part of practical events. A central role is afforded to the interpretative pattern of the “stabilizer” and the “innovator,” which is used in different ways to produce evaluations. This pattern is more than just an evaluative criterion. It is a sort of a “bass line” for organizational events: On the one hand, it is situationally variable and can be used to strengthen but also to devalue evaluations. On the other hand, it is a durable reference point for the communicative action of all the organization’s members, which overarches individual situations and the hiring process.

#### *The sequence of events in the hiring process*

The process developed as follows: As it became apparent that the head of the HR department of a location (B-Town) would move to another position within the company, two procedures to fill this vacancy were set in motion. The direct superior, the head of HR global, published an internal job posting and initiated a new procedure of personnel selection, the “team decision.” The decision about the selection of a candidate was not, as was customary, to be taken by a single person, the direct superior, but in form of a joint decision by representatives of all concerned stakeholder groups: The head of HR global (Mr. Zeller), the head of the location in

B-Town (Mr. Börner), two executives from the specialty departments at the location (Mr. Leiser and Mr. Pelz), and members of the local HR department (Ms. Abele-Moll and others). The following illustration depicts the course of the selection process:



As part of the process, all stakeholder groups initially expressed their expectations towards the candidate in written form. Next, they examined the applications received, which Mr. Zeller provided to all participants. The individual participants in the selection process separately formed their evaluations of the candidates and communicated them to Mr. Zeller, who compiled them into a ranking of the candidates. The two highest-ranking candidates were submitted to a series of interviews again separated by stakeholder groups. Afterwards, the participants again individually ranked the candidates (candidates in first and second place) and passed it on to Mr. Zeller. In a final meeting, a joint decision about the staffing was taken. All participants were made aware of the results of these individual steps via e-mail and phone conversations; Herr Zeller was in possession of further information based on phone calls and e-mail exchanges with the candidates and from a staff member of the personnel development department at the company's headquarters.

Concurrently, a further common hiring procedure for executive positions was observed: Independently from the job posting, the personnel developer from the company headquarters reached out to a possible candidate and inquired whether he could see himself taking on the vacant position. The candidate responded with interest, the head of HR global was informed, and the candidate handed in his application. This was known only to the actors directly involved.

The selection process thus took place in several stages. In the course of the process, the candidate that was approached before the joint decision procedure, Mr. Kluge, became the

front-running candidate. He was designated as the favorite by Mr. Zeller, placed first in both rankings, and during the interviews he was practically already viewed as the future boss by the HR department team. In the final meeting, however, Mr. Brockmeier, who placed second in the rankings, was selected to be offered the position. Yet, after a phone conversation with Mr. Zeller he refused the offer – and Mr. Kluge received the job.

In the following analysis we examine individual moments of evaluation in more detail and discuss how crucial elements of the evaluation and decision process are arranged in each case. In doing so, we take a look at a) the definition evaluative standards and criteria, their prioritization and application to the candidates; and b) to what extent the formation of an evaluation or decision is to be viewed as the result of actors' deliberate strategic or practical action.

### *The construction of evaluation standards and criteria*

In the course of the observed selection process there are phases in which individual actors act separately and simultaneously without coordination. There are also discernible junctions where actors encounter each other with their strategies and evaluations are communicatively negotiated.

One such evaluative moment is the definition of the expectations towards the candidates prior to the examination of the applications received ("stakeholder expectations"). This moment precedes the evaluation of the candidates and is a central part of any personnel selection process. Criteria to evaluate the candidates refer to notions internal to the organization but also external ones, that is, societal beliefs or professional standards. They contain assumptions about what constitutes a good performance (e.g. excellence in handling specific tasks), what an appropriate qualification is (e.g. years of experience), and what amounts to a good job-person-fit (e.g. the composition of the team). In formalized procedures of personnel selection these criteria are frequently spelled out and operationalized. However, there is also an implicit knowledge about what constitutes a relevant evaluative criterion, which the actors can make explicit upon inquiry. In such a manner, one of the HR team members, Ms. Abele-Moll explains:

*"So, I do this together with the specialty department, and there one looks at how it fits. If the specialty department says: Well, I have got enough creative scatterbrains now, what I actually need is someone with a somewhat different tendency, then one takes that into consideration, that it needs to fit together, that is something you have to shape together with the executive. And I think that Mr. Zeller also did it in this way, he looked at what type of people with differ-*

*ent skills and strengths were aboard and what does he need as an executive? What is in demand? Is there more of a demand for a preservationist or someone that brings innovation so that things move forward?"*

In doing so, she addresses several important dimensions that play a role in the procedure of the team decision: She points to the need for coordination between the specialty departments and the HR department; she points out that there are relevant actors (in this case: Mr. Zeller) that observe the situation and judge it in terms of what the demands towards the future position holder should be; and she states the goal that "it needs to fit together". Ms. Abele-Moll brings these aspects to the point in a classification of the candidates as "a preservationist" or "someone that brings innovation."

This interpretative scheme can also be found at the beginning of the selection process in the definition of the expectations and criteria by the stakeholder groups. The team members express their expectations in terms of the candidate's professional skills and experience. Additionally, the candidate should be proficient in coordinating tasks appropriately, possess communication skills, openness, and the ability to bestow recognition. Moreover, the future incumbent should be "*a modern creator with his/her (own) vision.*" The executives from the location phrase this in a similar manner: They expect "*creative and innovative solutions*" from the job holder; they also expect that he or she can "*get the rather young team up to speed quickly;*" that he or she possesses "*experience in managing a large location;*" that he or she "*takes up open topics proactively;*" and is motivated "*to creatively challenge established processes.*"

If and in what manner these expectations, which incorporate the pattern of "stabilizer" and "innovator" with different wordings (professional skills/expectations and creator/vision/proactive/creative), are systematically reviewed during the evaluation of the job applications remains an open question. Likewise, it is unclear and not explicitly stated which evaluative standards the actors use to define their expectations and criteria. Additionally, how the criteria are prioritized is equally unknown. However, a reference to a shared stock of knowledge and interpretative patterns is apparent, especially concerning the criterion of experience but also the invocation of notions regarding innovation and stabilization. In this way, the actors connect their expectations to each other, without having deliberately coordinated themselves. Yet, they do this in manner that leaves the standards and criteria in-use substantially underdefined, thereby affording considerable leeway to the application of the criteria during the course of the process.

### *The ranking: The preselection of the candidates*

The first ranking (“Ranking 1”), which was prepared after the application had been reviewed, also leaves open how the evaluations of the candidates came about. Generally, the function of a ranking is to indicate objectivity – quantitative indicators usually suggest unambiguousness and are considered dependable grounds for decision-making because they are based on calculations (Desrosières, 1998; Porter, 1992). In this case, the opposite holds true. It is unclear how the criteria established beforehand entered the evaluation; it is unclear why and in what manner Mr. Zeller weighted the votes of the participants. Moreover, it is not clear how the ranking of the location manager, Mr. Börner, was included. His approach of ranking only three candidates deviates from the previously communicated rules for the creation of the rankings, which stated to rank all candidates one through thirteen. Yet, based on this ranking – without further explanation – the two candidates that were invited for the job interviews were determined: Mr. Kluge and Mr. Brockmeier.

During the construction of the ranking, attempts to strategically alter the course of events are apparent. The two topmost actors pursue this in different ways: Mr. Börner boycotts the rules set by Mr. Zeller, thereby demonstrating a detachment from the latter’s procedure. Mr. Zeller, in turn, tries to offset this intervention by striving to influence the outcome of the ranking through several, not immediately comprehensible mathematical operations. However, there are limits to the strategies of both actors: Both attempts to influence the outcome are recognizable, both do not negate the actions of the other, and it was generally not foreseeable from the outset in which way the stakeholder groups would render their evaluations. A continuous strategy to influence the procedure in favor of a specific candidate is thus fraught with significant risk during the team decision procedure: Once several actors with varying communicative power are involved, a procedure is liable to uncertainties and cannot be consistently controlled.

### *The interviews*

After the development of the ranking, interviews with the two highest-ranking candidates were conducted (another candidate among the top three ranks had already retracted his application at this point). The conversations with the executives took place as group discussions with the respective candidates. All other interviews (with Mr. Zeller, Mr. Börner, and the team members) were conducted individually, so that over a period of one to two weeks the candidates attended a total of about ten interviews. During these conversations the predefined

criteria play a certain role: There were mutual introductions and the candidates described their previous background. Furthermore, substantive foci developed informally as part of the respective situation, for example, concerning experience, professional expertise regarding work in the field of HR, among other things.

These conversations formed, on the level of a reflexive decision, the basis for the evaluation of the candidates in a second ranking (see below). During the course of the interviews, it became obvious how important the direct communication between the participants is. Practical action not only the changed topics but also the demeanor and how actors related to each other. Especially during the conversations between the candidates and the team members closeness between the participants was established or not. While Mr. Brockmeier explained his views in a cavalier way and regarding what he assumed to be relevant to the team, Mr. Kluge integrated himself into the team. Through a calibration of language and topics, a relationship was established during the conversation, which culminated in the fact that he became the new head of the team in a manner visible from the outside (e.g. by rolling up his shirt-sleeves, discussing the team's specific concerns). Mr. Kluge himself summarized this in an interview, in which he remembers that he has "*made enormous strides in docking on to his counterpart*" during the course of these conversations. "*A completely different closeness developed*" because he was able "*to immediately use catchwords*" and it was "*palpable that you were delving deeper*":

*"It was not just an interview situation anymore but we were rather already in a staff meeting partly as applicant, therefore, I did not just introduce myself as the new boss to the employee but rather the employee immediately entered into a staff meeting with me."*

Thus, Mr. Kluge evolved, without this being deliberately controlled in any way, from applicant to future superior, with whom discussions at 'local eye level' were already possible and who was explicitly met with appreciation. On the level of practical action, the decision for Mr. Kluge thus developed "on the quiet." Not only references regarding content play a role here. Of greater importance are the linguistic and bodily references that convey implicit knowledge and create an atmosphere of community. Thus, this is not a deliberate situation of evaluation and decision – even though this is exactly the point where the decision who would be the future jobholder was taken practically.

*The rankings after the interviews*

After the interviews a second ranking (“Ranking 2”) was created. It was based on the individual, written feedback of the participants given to Mr. Zeller. Mr. Kluge was judged by the location’s executives, for example, as having a “*good and broad HR background and leadership experience*”; yet he was seen as “*sparingly visionary regarding the future of the location*” and that he “*appears very dry and with little emotion.*” Mr. Brockmeier, in contrast, commands a “*broad treasure trove of HR experience and leadership experience*”; he “*knows and lives ‘modern’ leadership principles,*” and he has “*visions for the future of the location.*” Whereas the team members evaluated Mr. Kluge as someone, who “*professionally has a lot of HR experience, several years of leadership experience*” and who brings “*new ideas/impulses to B-Town.*” The evaluations of Mr. Brockmeier were disparate; predominantly he is judged as being quite likeable but as lacking the necessary profundity of professional experience. Moreover, he is not familiar with the location, in contrast to Mr. Kluge, and did not obtain sufficient information about the local situation.

Thus, the criteria established at the beginning of the process are referred to in the evaluations after the interviews as well. Here too references are made to the pattern of “stabilizer” and “innovator”; however, with a) different attributions to the candidates and b) like before in an almost self-evident fashion concerning its content: What exactly constitutes a visionary attitude, for example, and how it is measured remains ambiguous. Furthermore, the stakeholder groups’ evaluations are based on different standards: The team evaluates the candidates according to an implicit standard that pertains to professional tasks and the cooperation among the team, while the location manager almost exclusively looks at the external impact and corporate policy and the executives focus on the cooperation with the specialty departments, especially in terms of recruiting new personnel.

The adaptability of the evaluative criteria and standards is already apparent at this point. Evaluative standards are not explicitly communicated and unified, criteria are assumed to be self-evident and are neither specified in terms of content nor monitored regarding their systematic application. This means that no explicit performance evaluation of the candidates according to clearly defined criteria takes place – that the candidates meet the basic requirements of the position is seen as given with this type of internal recruitment of executive personnel.

The fit between position and candidate is instead created via an implicit testing of interpretative patterns. These patterns are likewise not explicitly communicated and standardized. However, they are known to all members of the organization and are available to the actors as



an internal standard. A strategic course of action in the evaluation of the candidates by the actors is therefore possible, for example, the deliberate application or omission of evaluative criteria. Yet, this cannot be proven through external observation. Clearly discernable is only action in the mode of practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984): Actors applied their knowledge within the frame of learned practices, they refer tacitly to shared interpretative schemes and let themselves be guided by them in their observations, evaluations, and their courses of action. They do not continuously account for this to themselves or others.

### *The Meeting*

The job interviews and the comments based on them for the second ranking are both highly relevant moments of evaluation in which all actors are involved. However, the actors are not in an exchange together aimed at collectively bringing about a decision. In contrast, the final meeting is explicitly conceptualized as an occasion for evaluation and decision-making. A sort of public is supposed to be created here and the individual stances of evaluation are to be made visible. In such a situation, the constellation of actors in the face-to-face interaction and their organizational positioning gain prominence.

The discussion starts off with Mr. Zeller's presentation of the outcome of the ranking (Mr. Kluge above Mr. Brockmeier). Subsequently, the specialty departments' executives and the location manager, Mr. Börner, take the floor. They argue – irrespective of the ranking – to select the better candidate in their view, Mr. Brockmeier, because he is seen as the more innovative of the two candidates. The local team, they argue further, has been working together for a while and has an excellent deputy head. The necessary stability and professional reliability the team thus provides on its own. This constitutes a turnaround from the previous reasoning: Originally, at the start of the selection process the team was described in the evaluative criteria as “*rather young*” and in need of being brought “*up to speed quickly.*” Additionally, in the written feedback after the interviews, an advantage of Mr. Kluge was considered to be his ability to “*direct us very well as a team*” and that he could provide a “*stabilization*” of the team while simultaneously being receptive to new ideas.

Despite these evaluations formed in earlier phases of the selection process, all actors go along with the new reasoning during the meeting. This not only constitutes a fundamentally different evaluation of the candidates as compared to the rankings and the practical events at the interviews with the team. It also signifies a variable external and internal description of the team. Beforehand and during the interviews, it was repeatedly discussed that the team is

young in terms of both chronological age and duration of employment with the firm. While they are well trained, they were seen as needing stabilization. During the meeting a reinterpretation took place: While the team is young, it is experienced and well-trained. This recognition of their professional performance was reverberated in the reasoning of the team. On one hand, they nonetheless tried to defend their previously substantiated stance (Mr. Kluge in first place, Mr. Brockmeier in second place). On the other hand, they went along with the reasoning of the hierarchically and rhetorically superior executives (“sure, yes, we can stabilize ourselves”). In this way, an opportunity was opened to give more weight to the criterion of innovation as compared to stabilization.

Thus, in this evaluative situation, clear strategies are apparent. Mr. Zeller tries to convince the participants with the ranking. However, this is completely de-addressed and does not become a reference point for any reasoning at any stage of the discussion. Mr. Börner, in contrast, is able to relocate the goal posts: He refers to the interpretative pattern of the “stabilizer” and the “innovator,” thereby affiliating himself with an accepted and shared interpretative pattern. With his novel attribution of the evaluative criterion, while retaining its content-related vagueness (only Mr. Brockmeier innovative in some way), and the redefinition of the context (the team does not need a stabilizer) he initiates a reframing of the situation. He redirects the basic orientation of the group (the team is stable and experienced) and the participating actors cannot argue with this perception.

So, the situation of the meeting also shows the evaluative criteria to be fluid and adaptable. It also shows how, through the embedding of the criteria in shared interpretative patterns, a connection to previous moments of evaluation is established. This holds true for instances when the contents of these patterns are spelled out in a contradictory manner. Additionally, it is clear that and how strategic action is based on the differential distribution of communicative power. Communicative power does not only arise from the negotiation and structuring of the reasoning for the evaluation in a situation (see Bolander and Sandberg, 2013). It also rests on the successful reference to the material and symbolic structures of the organization regarding its hierarchies and interpretative schemes.

*The situations of personal conversation: The initial personal address and the telephone call concluding the selection process*

Besides those occasions explicitly designated as evaluative moments (the definition of the stakeholders’ expectations, the rankings, the meeting) other occasions of written or verbal

communication are part of the selection process. These often do not contain any further evaluations – the evaluation has taken place previously. In such a manner, the approach of personally addressing a candidate regarding a specific vacancy rests upon a continuous process of personnel development during which persons are observed and evaluated as part of institutionalized occasions for personnel assessment. These evaluations do not rest on themselves; they are matched to the requirements of organizational development. As soon as a vacancy occurs, the stock of candidates is purposefully scrutinized regarding who would best be worth considering – and only this person is taken into consideration and personally addressed.

Personally addressing a person – not only at the executive level – is thus part of the customary procedures within the studied firm. It constitutes an established practice and is connected to the formally and informally communicated expectations towards the organizational members. Among these is the explicitly expressed expectation for executives to network amongst each other but also to trust in the knowledge and decision-making power of relevant actors (“*Mr. Zeller also did it in this way, he looked at what type of people with different skills and strengths were aboard and what does he need*”). Therefore, this approach is seen as a guarantee that the appropriate person is selected and not as indicating an illegitimate, purely subjective personnel decision or a strategic arrangement based on individual interests.

This is also true for the telephone conversation at the end of the selection process in question, when the strategic influence of an actor is especially apparent. The initial situation is precarious: On the one hand, the candidate that was approached at the beginning of the process seems to have been the certain choice for the position. He becomes, without this being controlled, the one he is supposed to be during the interviews: The new boss. The unspoken decision, taken during the course of the interviews, to accept Mr. Kluge as the new head of HR is then thwarted by the decision taken in the meeting to offer the position to Mr. Brockmeier. Mr. Zeller resolves the resulting contradiction by indeed offering the job to Mr. Brockmeier but at the same reinterpreting the circumstances. He declares the salary classification of the position as fixed and not, as he previously indicated, open-ended. This results in Mr. Brockmeier retracting his application. Thus, Mr. Zeller reverses the decision taken during the meeting by reverting to a non-observable form of communication and by changing the content of the communication: Away from the candidate’s suitability and his motivation – if Mr. Brockmeier does not accept the job with a lower salary then his motivation is not sufficiently high.

With this intervention, Mr. Zeller reinstates the decision that had actually been taken with the personal address and the practical events of the interviews. This is clearly a controlling intrusion by a powerful actor that can be motivated by individual interest. However, this intervention could not develop the necessary legitimating force if it was not compatible with organizational practices and constructions of meaning. Indeed, this is the case here: It is generally accepted that someone who has been personally approached about a position gets it, and it is accepted that relevant actors assert their point of view.

The combination of the procedure of the personal address and the team decision is therefore, on the one hand, a risky strategy. Even though controlling the procedure of the team decision seems possible, it is susceptible to unexpected events and unintended side effects – regarding both the evaluations and the decisions of the participants. On the other hand, the juxtaposition and meshing of the procedures resulted in an additional legitimating effect. This is desirable, for example, during conflicts or when a new strategy of personnel recruitment, as in this case the team decision, is being “tested” or is intended to be made visible as an achievement of its own. In this respect, the use of both procedures is a strategy of mutual assurance: The uncertainty of the team decision (who is the best candidate? Can participants’ interests be balanced?) is reduced by predetermining a favorite. The uncertainty that can accompany the personal address (will it be accepted locally? Will the procedure be considered as inappropriate under certain conditions after all?) is alleviated by the team decision.

## ***Conclusion***

### *Strategy and practice in the process of evaluation*

With our analysis we were able to reconstruct the observed procedures and practices of the selection process and work out the underlying interpretative schemes. In the example presented here the selection of a candidate is explicitly laid out as a processual procedure. Therefore, it renders especially clear what is true for procedures that are less substantially and temporally far reaching: The selection of personnel is not the outcome of a momentary snapshot of an objective evaluation of a candidate. In fact, it is the result of a process in which actors’ strategic and practical actions interlock with each other and evaluations and decisions “harden” little by little.

The selection process is therefore to be understood as a stream of occasions that are linked to each other in different ways. Moments of evaluation are connected to each other through the continuous activity of the involved participants. They are also linked by previous evalua-

tions that are taken up again and are either carried forward or are rather de-addressed. In this way, temporal as well as substantive links are created. In the process, the criteria of evaluation are adaptable so long as they are supported by the meaning embedded in the organization's local order. On the one hand, these criteria and interpretative schemes are substantively open and underdefined, enabling a situational adaption. On the other hand, they are sufficiently precise to ensure substantive connections. The meaning of the criteria builds up sequentially during the evaluation process – but it is repeatedly open (or rather: prone) to deviations and variations.

Thus, the process of evaluation and decision is a kind of “concert” that is comprised of the (partly intended, partly unintended, partly coordinated, partly uncoordinated) improvisations of individual actors, the organization's structures (the material and symbolic order, the rules and procedures), and the “bass line” of the shared interpretative patterns. Irrespective of whether the actors follow the intended melody of the concert, that is, the established formal and informal structures, or whether they improvise in a highly idiosyncratic fashion, their actions can be strategic or carried out practically. Besides the deliberate influence on the decision-making process, an uncontrolled interaction of the participants always takes place. Both can lead to a decision.

In this way, individual strategies and intentional communicative action can mold evaluations and dominate situations. Individual motives as well as specific resources, authority, and stocks of knowledge put actors in – varyingly convenient and influential – positions to influence the course of events in their favor. However, equally relevant is the actors' practical communicative action. It consists of mutual connections that are systematic if not necessarily deliberate: by producing harmonies, by citing experiences and similarities, by connecting topics, by linguistic engineering (e.g. by translating one's own language into the language games of the group, by using the same words, etc.). In the course of this, relating to shared interpretations is indispensable – without the connection to interpretative patterns, which need to be known to all participants, such a process cannot work (at least a consensus-orientated process).

Embedded within this process are, to put it bluntly, strategies of the organization that exist alongside (or surround them) the strategies of individual actors. The interpretative schemes that form the basis of strategic and practical action transport and (re)produce the organization's local order. Thus, referencing “innovation” and “creativity”, on the one hand, and “stability” and “assurance” respectively, on the other hand, is a pattern that permeates the whole

organization – not only regarding the judgement of people in continuous everyday practices and the evaluation patterns of people in personnel selection procedures but also concerning the recruitment strategy and the orientation of the HR policy of the firm as a whole (with an almost unqualified focus on internal recruitment and assurance, long periods of employment with the firm, a policy of transfers rather than outplacement, etc.), and not least regarding the firm's products. The decision for a candidate is thus not solely the result of a deliberate strategy by an individual actor. Instead, it complies with a “strategy” of the firm that is embedded in the organizational members' reservoirs of knowledge and is effectual in their practical actions.

Concrete decisions are taken at several points within the decision process: during the pre-selection, in the practice of the interviews, in the meeting, and in the telephone conversation after the meeting. The linkage of evaluative moments happens on several levels. It is based on the connections between the actors/the communication and the referencing of shared interpretative patterns. The decision is taken at that moment when a sufficient number of actors interpret the decision as such. For personnel selection this is the case when there is a mutual recognition that one has become someone else (e.g. turned from applicant into the boss – for oneself and for the others). Exactly this is a central if not the central moment of evaluation; suddenly one recognizes the other as the special one.

*So test therefore... evaluation, strategy, and decision in the process of personnel selection*

Our analysis shows: The decision for a candidate is not taken at a specific point in time but is, rather, the result of the contingent linkage and sedimentation of evaluative moments. However, the final decision is not a simple accumulation of evaluations that become ever more valid. Instead, this process is characterized by an elasticity of the criteria and devices. This concerns their content, their application to the candidates, and their linkage to each other. Thus, moments of evaluation are substantively and temporally linked to each other. The linkage occurs due to the fact that the moments of evaluation are related to local and overarching organizational interpretive schemes, norms, and practices, which allow for their context-specific usage as well as their enduring establishment.

So, before organizations decide on a candidate to “join forever” (or at least for the foreseeable future), they use a series of interconnected “tests” to ascertain “if heart to heart be found together”, that is, whether the candidate provides a long-term fit for the position and the organization. This is not restricted to a person's professional qualifications but also his or her

suitability for a long-lasting integration into the organization's social relationships based on shared affects, expectations of personableness, manners, and values. Thus, the selection process is not only influenced by individual strategic interests but must also suit the organization's local order of attitudes, emotions, ideals, and personal trust. This includes not merely its recruiting strategies but also other deep-seated notions about the organizational products and strategies. Only in this way can the organization avoid the risks inherent in an incongruous personnel selection because after hiring an unsuitable candidate, as the *Song of the Bell* continues, "remorse is long."

In this way, uncertainty can be dealt with, and efforts to create reliable expectations on all levels of organizational events can be attempted. This is, however, a highly demanding occurrence: It requires a continuous reciprocal adaption between the organizational members and to the organization. It rests on a continuous updating of implicit knowledge and a continuous mutual observation of the actors. Such a permanent observation and testing would be problematic in the case that "heart to heart be found together" because the aim of the testing in advance is to make further testing after the decision unnecessary. Ideally, there are no regrets if there was sufficient mutual testing before entering the bond. What the consequences of a process of continuous testing and evaluating are for organizations has not been studied and should be a question for further research.

Then again, the function of the "testing" is the same in both cases. It concerns the handling of uncertainty and providing a legitimating assurance for the selection. Therefore, it is irrelevant whether there is a surplus of candidates or a desperate situation when at least one candidate has to be found. In the case of romantic relationships, one would neither justify to oneself nor like to be viewed by others as someone that picks just anybody. This also plays an important role in the case of organizations: For the identity of the organization (and its members) and for the legitimacy with others it is important as well to not select any person but on that meets the requirements of the position in a particular way. Thus, in both cases it always has to be a special one. This means that the process of selecting a person not (only) involves testing. In fact, it requires the creation of specialty: Selecting the right person simultaneously concerns the construction of the right person – and that is rarely a matter of "pure strategy" but always a process of (practical) mutual adaption and integration.

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