Does monster.com Have Any Byte? An Exploratory Dialogue

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abstract

Dot.coms were lauded in 1999. Dot.bombs were savaged in 2000. Dot.survivors linger in 2001. Despite this roller-coaster history the recruitment industry has gone on-line and digital. Fuelled by claims of access to "a gold standard workforce"[1] organisations are urged by the HR industry press to get on line to improve their recruitment strategies. Puzzled by the proliferation of hyperbole and the rhetoric of cyber-recruitment, we, two management academics decided to become participants in this brave new world of e-cruitment. Despite the promises of a sophisticated and effective method of attracting the best candidates for employers, as potential employees we found the on-line interaction to be frustrating and time-wasting. We spent hours attempting to respond to the on line prompts at various job sites and we experienced the decision protocols underlying the web-based recruitment programs to be so immutable we could not even succeed in registering our interest in any advertised position. This experience leads us into a dialogue as we both sought to understand our personal responses to the dissonance between the rhetoric of e-cruit-ment and our reality. Reflecting her theoretical bias towards a psychoanalytic perspective, Jan asked 'What in the process of recruitment is being defended against by the adoption of e-cruitment methods?' Sue's discourse perspective led her to a different question. 'What are the disciplinary effects of the discourses surrounding emerging social practices such as e-cruitment?' In the spirit of co-operative inquiry that encompasses a both/and approach we use these two critical theoretical perspectives to analyse the construction of 'e-cruitment' as a digital tool for attracting and selecting human resources. We intend to hold a dialogue that includes theoretical insights from both these perspectives to broaden our under-standing of the issues.

Sue: Recruitment and Selection: a Discourse Perspective

The Story

We attempted to find a great job on the Net. The right job for both of us. What we found was a very different world to the

Jan: Recruitment and Selection: a Psychodynamic Perspective

What's the Problem?

We just don't 'get' the hyperbole that surrounds the recruitment of staff on the Net. Within two weeks of logging on to a num-

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1 From a brochure advertising the Slash Time and Costs Through On-line Recruitment conference, Sydney, Australia, November 1999.

one promised in the rhetoric. When we registered ourselves as potential candidates for positions advertised on a number of recruitment sites we became increasingly frustrated and suspicious of the rhetoric. It took an inordinate amount of time to register because of slow Internet connections and tiresome design protocols that restricted our movements once on line.

In addition to this we were often asked to categorise ourselves into prearranged categories that did not fit our experience, skills and abilities. The system felt alienating, controlling and immutable. We failed to register for any job.

We could not accept our failure. We created a composite employee from the far-more impressive resumes of our respective former partners. Again we failed. We were genuinely frustrated, embarrassed and diminished by the experience.

Fortunately we work within an environment that despite all its many shortcomings, still allows opportunities for reflexive enquiry. We decided to use our experience to gain some greater, albeit personal understanding of recruitment and selection via the Internet.

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Background: The Discursive Construction of Reality

Recent developments in the social sciences have focused on language and the power of social discourses in shaping how we come to know and accomplish social or-

ber of job sites, brochures for two different conferences on electronic recruitment landed (coincidently) on our desks. Why would anyone pay $1500 a day to attend? All these claims – access to top talent, speed, greater power, lower costs, greater reach, improved efficiency, competitive edge - appear high-blown and fanciful (eg. Browne, 1998; Fister, 1999; Useem, 1999; CCH on-line, 2000; Kay, 2000; Goldsborough, 2000; topjobs.com.au, 2000; Zall, 2000). We thought the use of the Net was just a technological adjunct to standard processes of recruitment. And yet the claims suggest recruitment has been transformed (Wyld, 1998; Hilpern, 1999) and is undergoing "a paradigm shift" (advertising brochure, 1999)! What is meant by this? Our dialogue begins as we set out to explore.

Either/Or Theoretical Frameworks

The starting point of our dialogue represents the either/or of traditional academic critique. We shared a common experience, the personal humiliation of not being able to apply for a job and the recognition that our personal experience represented a problem worthy of further exploration. However we sought an understanding of this problem from two quite different theoretical perspectives. Sue experienced the process of on-line recruitment as a form of discipline, it seemed that only certain types of job applicants could register. I responded to the anxiety and humiliation the experience created and tried to make sense of the popularity of on-line recruitment from this position.

Background: The Presence of Anxiety

The requirement for quality staff in a competitive and globalised environment has placed growing pressure on all organisations to ensure they have the capacity and capability to meet the demands of re-

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ganisation. In the area of organisation studies, writers have used a discursive approach for understanding organisational strategy (Barry and Elmes, 1997), research (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Kilduff and Mehra, 1997), human resources management (Townley 1992), leadership (Calais and Smircich, 1988), gender inequalities (Alvesson and Due Billing, 1997 and Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998), organisational culture (Casey, 1999) and organisational analysis (Burrell, 1988 and Smircich, Calas and Morgan, 1992).

Discursive approaches to understanding social reality call into question the cultural and historical specificity language and knowledge in the process of knowing what is real and under what conditions reality exists. Language and knowledge from this perspective are not just symbolic systems that report the nature and state of a reality 'out there'. They are powerful and practical constituents of our locations and experiences across different historical and social contexts (Dachler and Hosking, 1995:4).

For example texts, theories, the popular press and other media, codes of morality, utterances and even computer programming protocols are powerful elements in the reality construction process. They represent forms of social practice that make available to us knowledge that tells us what there is to know and whether what we know is a valid account of our experience by providing us with 'rules' that tell us what is true and what is not (for example scientific knowledge). Hence concepts such as truth and reality are understood in terms of mechanisms through which knowledge and language constitute social reality in terms of seemingly incontrovertible truths that define and order our experience (Chia, 1996:14, Potter, 1996:125-140). Social discourse are

cruitment and selection. The process of selection is not a simple task. Any appointment of staff is mediated by organisational requirements, legislative prescriptions and social and political expectations; all within the context of significant financial repercussions should inappropriate or unlawful selection practices occur.

It is clear there is considerable scope for anxiety generated by the demands of recruitment and selection. These anxieties emanate from both the conscious and manifest concerns with the task of finding and securing the best applicant as well as the unconscious fears that are triggered by the selection process itself. And it is because of these conscious and unconscious anxieties that recruiters seek to control as much of the process as possible.

The agreed protocols of recruitment and selection whether addressed from the perspective of Human Resources Management (Stone, 1998; Compton and Nankervis, 1998) or organisational psychology (Schein, 1980) are based on assumptions of the necessity for rational choice and objective and scientific methods to select the right person for the right job. Sophisticated technologies and testing procedures have been designed with the intent to evaluate general ability, specific skills and personality and/ or psychological profiles of applicants (Compton and Nankervis, 1998). Any use of non-scientific processes of recruitment and selection are condemned (Compton and Nankervis, 1998; Di Malia and Smith, 1997; Graves and Karren, 1996/1998). Interviews whether formal or informal, conducted individually or in groups, by telephone or face-to-face are discouraged for their non-scientific and subjective bias in decision-making.

The ramifications of a poor appointment are so dire for the recruiter/ human re-

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defined by Alvesson and Billing as:

> a set of statements, beliefs, and vocabularies that is historically and socially specific and that tends to produce truth effects – certain beliefs are acted upon as true and therefore become partially true in terms of consequences. (1997: 40)

They are central to understanding practical strategies that give rise to competing social realities. The elaboration of meaning through discourses involves conflict (for example, the conflict inherent in the different theoretical approaches outlined here) over competing and hierarchically ordered systems of knowledge.

While dominant discourses such as those surrounding the Internet and e-cruitment appear powerful in shaping our experience (what's wrong with us? Why don't we fit in to job specifications?) as we applied for a job on line, discourses are inherently unstable, contradictory and ambiguous. This quality of discourse is usually hidden from view through discursive mechanisms that continually and productively constitute and reconstitute an apparently seemless and consistent view of reality.

In the context of this study, a discursive approach offers an inclusive and generative path towards a greater understanding and comprehension of the social world because it seeks to bring into focus the ambiguities, contradictions and instabilities embedded in social discourses. It allows us to ask questions about why we know what we know about the Internet and e-cruitment so we can deconstruct taken for granted assumptions that create unchallengeable truths about the Internet and e-cruitment.

Disciplining Social Reality Through Prohibition Mechanisms

Foucault (1981) argues that discourses

sources practitioner/ manager every effort is made to minimise any personal or subjective involvement in the process. The demand is for recruitment processes that embrace the latest technologies, are scientific, objective and provide perfect predictors of the perfect employee.

The Development of Social Defences Against Organisational Anxiety

There is a large body of work within organisational literature that recognises the influence personal and group psychology has on organisational life (eg. Schein 1965; Katz and Kahn, 1978; Levinson, 1978; Hirschhorn, 1990; Diamond, 1993). For this discussion however I shall be focussing on the psychodynamic approach that emerged from the Tavistock Institute in London by researchers who examined the way in which participation in work and organisational life stimulates painful anxieties which in turn leads to the creation of powerful defensive systems within organisations. Elliot Jaques (1955) and Isobel Menzies (1970) showed that in addition to functional reasons for the establishment of various organisational systems, processes and structures these arrangements also provided organisational cohesion in the defense against shared anxieties.

In describing this process as a social defense, the concept provides a link between individual and collective anxieties and provides a way of seeing the interrelationship between the individual and the group. It is as an individual taking up a work role that particular anxieties are generated; it is in establishing systems to defend against those anxieties that social systems are created. Over time the social defense system is built up and maintained as members of the group enter unconscious agreements to diminish their task-related anxiety

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contain within them the will to truth, legitimating mechanisms that define and defend some forms of knowledge and ways of knowing reality over others. The will to truth is productive because the will to truth creates practical strategies that function to maintain the legitimacy and stability of competing social discourses.

The disciplining effects of social discourses are the consequences of procedures of exclusion that operate through strategies of prohibition, division and rejection that function to maintain the truth effects of social discourse. These strategies give rise to specific forms of social practice whilst prohibiting others thereby constituting specific and possible ways of knowing in terms of what is possible to do or say or construct as real. For Foucault (1981) this is evidenced by the growth of regulatory practices throughout history that constitute ways of knowing reality in terms of classifications and rankings via strategies of prohibition, division and rejection (Foucault, 1981; see also Townley, 1993 for the use of these ideas in relation to Human Resources Management).

Prohibition strategies discipline our understanding and experience of social reality by placing constraints on objects and circumstances of speech. These strategies name what can be talked about, how it is discussed, what can be named in discussion and who is authorised to name and speak for certain kinds of knowledges.

Prohibitions constituted through social discourse permit strategies of division and rejection that divide the world up into the real, what is true, good, moral or right and the 'other' that which cannot be incorporated or embraced by the true or correct reality. For example disciplinary (as in various academic) knowledges divide the world into elements that can be legitimately incorporated into specific academic

(Gilmore and Krantz, 1990).

Identifying the ways in which organisational members use the psychological processes of splitting, projective identification, idealisation and so on Elliot Jaques provided an elegant example of how the experience of splitting and projection has institutionalised the role of a first officer aboard a ship. Any ambivalence, negative feelings, fears and doubts experienced by the crew is split off and projected onto the First Officer, whose duty is to take responsibility for everything that goes wrong. This unconscious process allows the ship's Captain upon whom the crew is dependent, "to be more readily idealised and identified with as a good protective figure" (1953/1990: 426).

Yet another example is provided by Menzies' (1970) in her seminal work on nursing, in which she argued considerable anxieties are generated when engaged in the tasks required of an occupation essentially about illness and death. In performing these tasks feelings of fear, disgust and distaste may emerge, just as feelings of compassion, guilt and libidinal and erotic attraction may be experienced. She showed that in an effort to defend against these anxieties, systems within hospitals were designed to limit close contact between nurses and individual patients - rosters rotated staff through different wards and shifts; rituals were introduced such as waking patients to give them drugs when sleep was more beneficial; patients were often identified not by name but by bed or illness and so on. With no particular ties to any individual patients and with no thought required to perform mindless rituals nurses were able to avoid feelings of anxieties. Although the experience of nursing may have changed since Menzies' account the use of social defenses has not.

Before moving to a discussion of how the

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systems of knowledge governed by epistemological rules that define what is and what is not counted as valid knowledge.

The Internet as an 'as if' Reality

Strategies of prohibition, division and rejection operate to discipline ways of knowing about the Internet by defining and de-limiting what we can know about on-line recruitment and the technologies that make it possible.

A good example is the mystery that surrounds the nature and operations of the Internet. For many of us, the Internet is at once part of our everyday life and a mystery. We use it everyday but at the same time we wonder about its scope, applications, its size and its phenomenal rate of growth. What is it? Where is it? How does it work? Who pays? Who are involved in it and how are they related to one another? These are questions often asked and seldom answered.

Wynn and Katz's (1998) discussion of an 'as if' world constructed through the internet may offer some explanation for why it is difficult to remove the mystery surrounding the Internet. This 'as if' world represents an unreal reality, a fantastical world, qualitatively different and disassociated from the reality outside the Internet.

While we do not consider the processes through which these realities are constituted we do provide a good summary of the rhetoric surrounding the WWW and popular constructions of Internet realities. These include:

- Futurism and radical scenarios
- WWW as fantastic and unreal
- It bears no relation to the current social context
- WWW has transformed culture
- Social domain with no known bounda-

use of on-line recruitment may act as a defense against the anxiety experienced by recruitment and selection there are two further points that must be made. The first is to address the difference between Sue's analysis and my own. The second is to examine just a few of the psychological issues associated with recruitment and selection.

Different positions – similar desire

It is apparent from a comparative reading of Sue's understanding of the use of online recruitment and selection, we adopt quite different analyses. This is an issue that has occasioned much discussion between us outside of this more formal and less personal dialogue. Our individual work reflects knowledge of, and support for these different perspectives. Even though we are aware there are many academics drawing on either perspective who may rage against the other, we do not experience the positions as incommensurable.

We both argue there are many dimensions to work-life experiences – our mutual interest is in the main however in the political (institutional) and the psychological (the personal/ interpersonal). Through the use of political critique we hope to encourage activity and change. The psychoanalytic dimension is used as an aid to understand behaviours and systems that often defy comprehension. The discursive dimension is used as an aid to understand behaviours and systems that are often hidden from our comprehension. Again, it is our hope that in assisting understanding we can contribute to action that benefits organisational members and their clients/ customers and so on.

Our different analyses are not presented as either/ or dichotomies. We do not intend to argue the finer points of our positions

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The materiality and legitimacy of this world is created and sustained through strategies that prevent or prohibit us from comparing it with realities outside the Internet. How can we compare the world we now know with such a futuristic, unreal and difficult to define scenario? We can't because we only have limited discursive resources made available to us to do so. This is a point made by Civin (1999) who argues that competing views on cyber-technology tend to occupy two extremes – the anti-technological Luddism and the absolutely rhapsodic.

For me, these articles demonstrate the discursive limitations in possible ways of knowing about the Internet. We can go with the mystery and engage in a rhapsodic support of cyberspace or question the mystery and engage in the dangerous Luddism of those who are sceptical. There is no room for fence-sitting!

The discursive strategies of prohibition, division and rejection discipline our understanding of the Internet by constituting systems of hierarchically arranged and often mutually exclusive realities. These discursive strategies constitute the Internet in terms of an either/or reality by reference to that which is outside its ken (quite literally), the other, a world that is not the Internet.

Disciplining Human Resources

HRM, as Jan argues across, is concerned with the development of objective and scientific methods for recruiting and selecting appropriately qualified staff in an efficient and effective manner. In order to achieve this aim, HRM theories and practices operate as techniques that render the subjects of HRM, people and organisations, objects of practice by construing them as control-

during the dialogue. We are aware this may be constructed as mealy-mouthed and wimpy we nonetheless contend our argument is with a process that normalises the dehumanisation of employer-employee relationships. We believe our anger and hostility is better directed against such "innovations" as on-line recruitment sites rather than against each other.

The Anxious Recruiter

For the purposes of this paper issues shall be examined only from the perspective of the recruiter and will be limited to only three issues - the myth of the perfect or idealised employee, feelings of envy and of rejection and exclusion.

The Perfect or Idealised Employee

Pressures for improved performance, growing incidence of corporate mergers and rationalisations, downsizing, global competition and so on are creating a demand for "super-employees" who have multiple skills and can work within increasingly demanding working environments (Ulrich, 1993; Graves and Karren, 1996). These expectations of super-employees are both difficult to achieve and highly ambiguous. For instance commentators, while noting the paradox as if an aside, identify the necessity for employees to take risks but avoid failure; know every detail of the business and delegate more responsibility; be passionate about vision and be flexible and able to change direction quickly and speak up, be a leader and be participative, listen and co-operate (Kanter, 1990).

It is apparent that no employee can fulfil these impossible (dare one say schizophrenic) expectations. Such demands create fantasies of an ideal or perfect employee and in so doing create for recruiters an impossible task. At an executive level

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lable and manageable units through the application of rational and scientific methods.

Townley (1993) argues human resource theory and practice encompasses a broad range of complex and heterogeneous elements of organisation and human behaviour, which are defined and ordered by HRM discourses. Following Townley's (1993) post-modern analysis, I argue that discourses surrounding on-line recruitment give rise to strategies of division and rejection that simultaneously define both the subjects and the relations assumed in personnel recruitment activities on the Internet.

Here are some examples of the outcomes of these disciplining mechanisms:

The Internet is 'HOT'

'The Internet is 'HOT'. It is new, technologically advanced and therefore its efficacy as a recruitment tool cannot be questioned.' Similarly the goodness and technological savvy of those involved in Internet recruitment also cannot be questioned.

This rhapsodic rhetoric (Civin, 1999) not only creates a discursive space that disciplines our ability to question the underlying assumptions of recruitment on the Internet, it disciplines our concept of the recruit and the recruiter by dividing up potential employers and employees into two groups, those who use on-line recruitment (read those who are 'hot', modern, technologically savvy) and the 'others' (read those who are 'not hot': the less technologically savvy and less successful) who don't.

The 'others' those who don't participate in on-line recruitment face rejection and failure. They are the ones left behind (see the

perfection may require the skills and qualities of a superhuman saviour. And yet despite the elevation in the business press of some corporate leaders to superhuman status the essence of humanness is imperfection. The fantasy of the perfect employee or the leader as saviour is just that – a fantasy.

The cost of belief in finding the perfect employee can be enormous. Intrinsic to the fantasy of the perfect employee is the fear of hiring an imperfect candidate. Such a fear may (and has) paralyse/d the process of seeking the most suitable candidate, whether it be on an insistence the advertising be listed as widely as possible, that a large enough pool of candidates is available, that all selection criteria be met and so on. In this circumstance no employee can ever be 'good enough'.

Rejection and Exclusion

Corporate down-sizing, frequent mergers and acquisitions, outsourcing of services, privatisation of government services and agencies and a sustained unemployment rate in Australia of about 8% have all contributed to a large pool of professionals seeking employment. Although not all commentators on the human cost of down-sizing see a parallel with extermination camps (see Stein, 1996), the psychological impact of forced redundancy can be enormous (Sparrow and Cooper, 1998; Luthans and Sommer, 1999; Grunberg, Anderson-Connolly and Greenberg, 2000).

It is this contextual factor that must be considered when making explicit the presence of rejection and exclusion within each step of the process of recruitment and selection. Because there are usually more applicants than positions available the task of informing a candidate of success is mediated by the awareness that many more applicants must be informed of their fail-

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dinosaurs below), the inefficient and ineffective ones like Jan and myself.

The Internet is Transformative

'The Internet is transformative. It has radically transformed the rules of recruitment by changing the rules and relationships in the HR process of recruitment and these changes cannot be ignored.' Hence statements such as 'the world of recruitment is changing' and HR practitioners need cheaper faster delivery of services because of the global nature of the business world are examples of this rhetoric. The implication is that HR people are desperate for new recruiting strategies and new types of recruits and the Internet will help them transform their recruitment practices (see for example Bryant, 1999:34-35).

Strategies of division and rejection work to at once create the world in which HR recruitment operates (global and rapidly changing) and the kinds of practices HR practitioners must adopt (technologically sophisticated) to find new kinds of recruits (hot? sexy? technologically savvy?). The world HR practitioners once inhabited is gone, rejected out of hand as an irrelevant past along with the activities they traditionally engaged in as the next section demonstrates. In addition to this those that they deal with, potential employees are radically transformed into the new workforce for the 21st Century.

The Old Ways are Difficult and Crude

The 'other' divided off world must be rejected because the 'old ways' of recruitment are difficult, outdated, technologically naive and crude as the following extract states.

> Recruiting will not be the rather crude process it is today of plugging a roughly round person into a roughly round hole and hoping that the fit is good enough. (Callander, *HR*

ure – that is, of their rejection. To reject is almost as unpleasant as to be rejected; responses to the feelings rejection invokes may vary – but for most are feelings of considerable anxiety. As infants we were excluded from our parents' world and every person no matter their subsequent circumstances therefore has experience of rejection and exclusion. Rejection is to deny belonging and attachment – and to belong is considered a fundamental human psychological and physiological need (Maslow, 1970; Bowlby, 1973; Klein, 1986).

For recruiters, although it is they who are engaged in the act of rejection and exclusion, it is the anxiety of their own rejection that is projected on to unsuccessful applicants and experienced in the act of excluding an Other.

Envy

One of the rarely discussed features of organisational life, envy, can also be readily invoked during the process of conducting a search for a new employee (Bedeian, 1995; Stein, 2000). The *New Shorter Oxford Dictionary* suggests there are two aspects to envy – the first involves a wish to have the good fortune and/ or possessions of an Other; the second involves feelings of resentment and discontent towards the more fortunate Other.

It has been suggested social comparison is often the trigger for envy (Duffy and Shaw, 2000). And so much of the recruitment and selection process creates circumstances in which social comparison is inevitable. Employee résumés and curriculum vitae provide significant amount of personal information that is readily accessible to all those involved in the selection process. Details of place of residence, educational achievements, career history and successes and so on can

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Don't be a Dinosaur

'Recruiting is never easy (Gallagher, 1999: 154-155), but of course the Internet makes it easy'. Here we find dividing and rejecting strategies at work once again, The Internet world of science and technology is contrasted with and rejecting of the alternative – existing technologies used for acquiring, tracking and developing human capital. Traditional recruitment tools are outlawed. The Internet offers technical sophistication and managers and recruiters are implored not to become 'dinosaurs' (Howes, 1999:55). The Internet simultaneously offers managers the potential to add value and become technologically sophisticated (hot – see above), as well as avoiding the difficulties of making judgements about potential job candidates. The technology will do the choice work (see Greengard, 1998:75).

Summary

In summary, strategies of prohibition, division and rejection work to construct the Internet as a world of science that takes the inexactitude out of recruiting staff. Simultaneously the strategies of division and rejection take the complexity out of human beings in a pared down social reality where social relationships are made simple through the mediation of sophisticated technologies.

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provide a very clear image (or fantasy) of the applicants. And of course, no matter how pedestrian the applicant, résumés are invariably designed to highlight successes and achievements. Yet, even being conscious of the upbeat résumé, any unfulfilled desires or resentments felt by the recruiter may be accentuated by the discrepancy between the recruiters' own achievements and the alleged successes of job applicants.

It is outside the realms of this paper to consider the ways in which envy may influence the selection process – at this point my only concern is to suggest envy is invoked by the necessity to read applicant's employment and life histories. Envy at its most intense can be very destructive (Klein, 1957) – irrespective of its intensity it is always an unpleasant and distressing emotion to experience (Parrot and Smith, 1993; Stein, 2000). Whether acknowledged or not I suggest envy forms a significant component of the emotional exchange experienced by recruiters.

Summary

It is apparent involvement in recruitment and selection of staff can be a process fraught with psychological stresses. Either consciously or within their unconscious recruiters face fundamental anxieties – the anxiety of fear of failure, the anxiety of rejection and exclusion as well as the anxiety created by envy. The use of the Internet is clearly a perfect tool to address the requirement for a large global pool of potential applicants. With claims of reach and access that transcend national borders and appears without boundaries, e-cruitment can be understood as providing the possibility that the "perfect" employee who is "out there" can be found and attracted to join the organisation. Nonetheless it I still find it difficult to understand how e-cruitment has radically trans-

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formed the essence of recruitment and selection. I shall therefore argue the Internet is just one more technological tool in a raft of tools recruiters use to defend against the anxieties generated by the process of recruitment and selection.

Dialogue

Jan, in response to your concluding paragraph, I agree. The Internet has not transformed the recruitment process. The discourses surrounding the Internet have created an 'as if' world where technology has transformed a previously difficult and definitely not sexy activity into something alluring and exciting. It seems a prominent theme in the discourses surrounding the Internet is that it is hot. What is your response to this?

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This is a dividing and rejecting strategy. The subtext of the 'Internet is hot' is of course, everything else is not hot. As I indicate in my brief analysis discourses surrounding the Net and Internet recruitment create a dichotomy that discipline the ways in which we not only come to know and talk about Internet but as you indicate Jan, construe those involved in online recruitment activities, employers and employees. Internet recruitment is given a materiality and legitimacy by linking into discourses of rationality and technical competence to construct the either/or

My first response to the use of 'HOT' is hot and sexy; hot and sweaty. Sex. I don't think it necessary to embark on a discussion about Freud's identification of the power of the libidinal drive because we all understand at some level why sex sells. I guess it is easy though to suggest why recruiting through the Net might be attractive – if the Net is hot, then presumably people who use the Net are also hot. Therefore if I use the Net I am hot and the people I want to recruit must be hot too. As I mentioned one of the anxieties of finding suitably qualified staff is the necessity to find people with the appropriate range of skills, competences, attributes and experience. Almost by implication, to be hot also means smart and savvy and with the skills required to be part of a new millennium workforce. The use of the Net is therefore a screening process - the very use of the technology ascribes particular qualities to the prospective employee. These qualities are usually male, young and Tertiary-educated (see Hoffman, Novak and Chatterjee, 1995). In my quest for the idealised and perfect employee, there is some reassurance that the hot employee who is "out there" is within the reach and access of the Net. From a personal perspective there is also real attraction in using the Internet. If I am hot I am not dull and boring and drab. From a psychodynamic perspective my doubts and fears about my "hotness" quotient can be split off and projected into the Net – which can then be introjected or taken in as hot. In this process I get rid of my un-cool bit and because I use the Internet I am now

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world of relatively simple, rational, and technology based solutions to a complex and difficult activity. Other ways of thinking about the Internet or recruiting staff on-line are rejected and dispensed with time and time again. The Internet is constituted and legitimised as not only the 'one best way' for recruiting staff but also the staff that are recruited are constituted as being of a particular kind with particular qualities which 'fit' into the futuristic scenario of Internet recruitment. Potential employees are no longer mundane, messy, complex and difficult to categorise individuals; they are constituted as an undifferentiated group of highly skilled, technologically savvy, committed and discriminating people.

Jan, I think you are falling victim to the rhetoric. The *ephemera* journal is just another way of providing a publication opportunity for academics such as ourselves. I argue the appeal of the journal is not the medium through which it is published, i.e. the Internet, but rather the fact that it provides us with an opportunity to publish this kind of theoretical exploration.

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Yes, I think the idea of splitting is very relevant. I see it in terms of practical strategies of prohibition, division and rejection that discipline and simplify ways of knowing complex social phenomena. All the messy stuff, the difficulties programmers face in developing software to deal with human complexities and differences are split off, assumed away, rejected out of hand. We are discursively prohib-

cool (a.k.a. hot).

A personal thought and an aside – what does this concept of HOT mean for us seeking publication in *ephemera*, an on-line journal? I would have to admit I do find the whole concept of *ephemera* very attractive, desirable and dare I say, sexy? It is not mainstream – so is a challenge to conservatives. That's fine. Because its editorial board and processes maintain academic rigour it nonetheless has the necessary legitimacy and integrity. Good. But it is more. Because of the mystique that still surrounds the cyberworld it is as if even entering that domain provides an immediate and attractive cachet. It does feel as if we can transcend our personal and career demographics and create our Selves in a way not possible in other media. It is as if publication in *ephemera* can contribute to our identity.

I think you are right here Sue. I realise I have probably been seduced by the rhapsodic. It's worth giving more thought to this. It would also be interesting to pursue this with the founders and editors of this journal. Returning to your earlier point, you talk of the world of either/or used as a way of simplifying the difficult and complex and chaotic. It sounds very similar to the process of splitting, projection and idealisation – Melanie Klein (1986) refers to this as the paranoid schizoid position in which the dichotomy of good/ bad or simple/ complex and so on is established in order to manage the complexity and uncertainty of living. Of course this position may lead to rigidity and loss of creativity (Krantz, 1996) – so focused are we on maintaining the dichotomous relationships there is little room to contemplate playing with possibilities or challenging the basis of the split. It is also apparent we have a shared view of the "idealisation" of the potential applicants – you refer to the undifferentiated in which there is no room

ited from discussing such difficulties as well as psychologically defending ourselves from them. Your point about the idealised employee is also interesting. The discourses surrounding the Internet constitute those engaged in on-line recruiting (recruiters and recruitees) as rationalised, relatively contextless, non-complex and homogenous participants and 'the other' those who do not embrace the technology or fit the requirements of online recruiting. At a more personal level we both experienced this when we attempted to register ourselves for jobs on one of the on-line recruitment sites. Our skills and experiences did not fit neatly into the categorisations offered by the database protocols. Do you have a further comment about this?

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for shades of skill, competence etc. Again, from my perspective the use of recruitment on the Net perpetuates the myth or fantasy of the perfect employee.

Before I answer the question it is probably worth offering a brief explanation of the practicalities of on-line recruitment. For recruitment companies and companies conducting their own recruitment on-line, software and hardware has been developed to sort resumes matching key words to pre-set criteria, to conduct on-line psychological and behavioural testing, to interview applicants and generate letters for unsuccessful applicants (see McCune, 1998). Interactive voice response or computer assisted telephone-screening systems have also been developed to automate the recruitment process (McCune, 1998; Davey, 1998). Should it be required by any recruitment agency or employing company the technology can ensure there is no human involvement in the process of recruitment and selection. It is apparent the use of Internet technologies in the process of recruitment and selection creates considerable distance between recruiter and potential applicant. Just as the use of technology in the finance industry has changed the concept of "customer" from a flesh and blood person who meets with a teller or a consultant or a bank manager to a transaction file that details dealings with bank services (Arnold, 1998), the use of on-line recruiting has changed a potential job applicant to a resumé and the recruitment company to "a portal for job-seekers" (Steggall, 2000). The many claims of the technology in general and the Internet in particular make it a very attractive tool for recruiters not just for its efficiencies but because of the diminution of any direct human involvement in the selection process. The technology portrayed as objective, rational, impersonal and powerful (Shade, 1997) meets the demands for scientific and

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I agree. Those who engage in Internet recruitment are participating in a pared down reality where the relationships between individuals are constituted in rational and impersonal terms. I see this in

objective tools methods of recruitment and selection. An additional feature attractive to HR recruiters is the claim the Internet provides anonymity which can transcend gender, ethnic and racial differences (Falk, 1998; Wallace, 1999). The use of on-line recruitment methods can therefore be sold as non-prejudicial or discriminatory. From a psychodynamic perspective the attractiveness of on-line recruitment can be understood as instituting a social system that depersonalises job seekers and removes any subjective engagement between recruiter and potential employees. Even more than the lack of relationship is the depersonalisation demanded by the technologies and software. Applicants and/or the resumés that represent them are stripped down into keywords that can then be manipulated into determining a skill-job fit. Any sense of personhood is rendered irrelevant and extraneous to the disembodiment of the skill and/or experience. Just as Menzies identified the way in which ritualised systems served as an antidote to the anxieties of nursing, so too does the use of Internet technology to conduct recruitment and selection allow recruiters deny the anxieties generated by recruitment. So to answer your question Sue: I think because the requirements of the technology (of course which are driven by the people who demand and programme it) we were little more than disembodied entities. I recall how we felt at the time. We tried to engineer our work experience to fit the requirements and we couldn't do so. There was no opportunity for us as whole people to be considered – our bits did not fit. And our bits, let alone our whole were not valued. At the time we tried to find a phone number to speak to someone about the application and the only point of contact was an email address. Not only could we not be known to the recruiting company they could not be known to us. There was no opportunity to establish any relationship in any way

terms of what Foucault calls 'normalisation'. The discourses surrounding Internet recruitment operate as both an objectivizing force and a subjectivizing force. The Internet at once creates categories of job seekers and defines the subjectivities of those who fit the category 'job seeker'. Again as I said before, this depersonalised category assumes an undifferentiated group of individuals, a group of same people who fit the mould.

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I think this is an interesting point. It seems that the discourses surrounding e-cruitment do not constitute job seekers as individuals capable of creating and changing their individual subjectivities in analysis or problematise individual uniqueness this would be difficult to handle electronically. It is preferable to consider job applicants as key words on a C.V not complex human beings capable of presenting particular unique selves to the world. Well it seems I have the final word in this dialogue but I speak for both of us and the multitude of other academics who write from different theoretical perspectives. The phenomena of e-cruitment needs further investigation. We have provide some food for thought from our unique perspectives and our dialogue across perspectives, over to you…

with the recruiters or the recruiting company. It felt very strange and also very alienating.

You mention undifferentiated which leads me to an observation. In the course of conducting research for this paper I have been struck with the divide that appears as a result of the differentiation of the available literature in this area. For instance, there is a huge body of material devoted to the practicalities and practise of on-line recruitment but contains very little theoretical analysis. On the other hand there is a large body of analysis of human-computer interaction created by the use of the Internet. The analyses whether psychological, technical, critical or cultural (see Turkle, 1985; Young, 1995; Wynn and Katz, 1997; Falk, 1998; Wallace, 1999; Civin, 2000) appear however to focus on dialogue across emails, within discussion groups, in bulletin boards, in MUDS (multi-user dungeons) and MOOS (MUDS object oriented) in home pages and so on. Despite the ubiquity of the Internet within workplaces there appears very little reference to the construction of on-line relationships within an organisational setting. How would you explain from your perspective this either/or dichotomy created between the non-reflexive HR, organisational commentary and the abstract analyses of private behaviours when presenting material on the experience of relationships on the Internet?

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