Ethics and Integrity: What Australian Organizations Seek and Offer in Recruitment Advertisements

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Abstract

Despite widespread agreement surrounding the importance of ethical standards, little agreement exists as to how organizations should proceed. While some authors suggest that organizations are responsible for their ethical environment, others see individual ethical standards as more critical. General agreement does exist on the need for organizations to possess and communicate positive messages about their ethical precepts. Organizations seen in a positive ethical light will acquire enhanced reputations, and are more likely to attract ethical employees. This exploratory study examined Australian job vacancy advertisements, assessing organizational communication to potential employees in terms of ethics and related concepts. The study found that most organizations make little effort to communicate ethical requirements to potential employees or to address the importance of ethics in them. Implications for employers and for further research are discussed.

Introduction

The adoption of exemplary ethical standards in organizations is increasing in importance. There is little need to justify this statement, as there is general empirical and normative agreement. What is and ought to be done is generally accepted. The same agreement however is

not found in how this improvement in the ethics of organizations can be accomplished. Some argue more ethical organizations will result if ethical people are recruited in organizations, whilst others argue that organizations will be more ethical if they increase their attention to ethics in both their formal and informal systems. These approaches indirectly address the issue of moral responsibility in organizations and organizational moral personhood. Traditionally, individuals in organizations have been held responsible and accountable for ethical misbehavior. More recently however, culpability for moral misbehavior is placed on business organizations as well.

The two viewpoints are based on the mainly sociological distinction of whether the person makes the place or the place the person. If the person makes the organization then the organization will reflect personal values and beliefs. In this case organizations ought to recruit ethical people in order to be ethical and behave ethically. If however the place makes the person, organizations need to have an ethical culture and climate that will affect persons acting in and for them.

The current study addresses organizational external recruitment activities and the issue of ethical language in them. Gatewood, Gowan and Lautenschlager (1993) found that the amount of information presented in the recruitment advertisement of an organization was strongly related to the recruitment image constructed by applicants. The more information made available in recruitment advertisements the more likely the intention to pursue employment. Recruitment activities are important because if we accept the viewpoint that the people make the place, then we must ensure that the people we attract to the organization have the values and capabilities that will be congruent with those of the organization. If however we accept the effect of the context on the individual, we have to communicate the values and norms that will need to be adopted by successful employees.

In the current study, we are addressing the issue of how Australian organizations communicate ethics and integrity in their recruitment advertisements. This is an exploratory research that seeks to establish patterns of ethics and integrity references, analyse their occurrence and address the implications for ethics and integrity in organizations.

Organizational Ethics and Integrity

Business organizations are increasing their efforts to promote and guarantee ethical behavior. In America, 60 per cent of organizations maintain a code of ethics (McDonald & Nijhof, 1999). The number of codes developed by Australian companies is increasing primarily in response to external pressure. Since 1995, Australian Stock Exchange Listing Rule 4.10.3 requires listed companies to report on their corporate governance practices in their annual report (Hicks, 1999). Most listed organizations responded to this demand with the creation of a code of ethics.

The approach adopted by many organizations supports the notion that they adopt the view that the place makes the person, because it primarily emphasises codes of conduct and compliance programs. It also communicates the belief that individuals are opportunistic and they will further their selfish interests over those of the organization (Falkenberg & Herremans, 1995). This is confirmed by the emphasis of codes of conduct on protecting the organization from its own employees (Schwartz, 2000). The effectiveness of these programs is questionable (Falkenberg & Herremans, 1995; McKendall, DeMarr, & Jones-Rikkers, 2002; Soutar, McNeil, & Molster, 1994). It has also been argued that they will remain ineffective unless supported by an ethical informal organizational system (Falkenberg & Herremans, 1995), because people conform with unwritten codes of behavior much more than with formal control systems (O'Reilly, 1989).

Bell's (1998) dichotomy of the two extreme views of social control is applicable to organizations, when they are examined as social systems. One view perceives a social system as the force that shapes the individual. It provides to the individual the illusion of autonomy, whilst in reality it determines the individual's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. The other view, the minority according to Bell, perceives society as the product of individual and collective choices and decisions. The social order is constructed by the actions and interactions of purposive individuals, and these actions and interactions make social change possible. This view accepts the existence of unintended or unanticipated consequences that require correction.

Some philosophers go beyond the acceptance of the organization as a social system and attribute moral agency and personhood to it

(French, 1979, 1996; Garrett, 1989; Weaver, 1998). Generally however organizations are accepted as moral worlds (Goodpaster, 1989; Nesteruk, 1991) even if not as moral persons. Goodpaster treats organizations as moral worlds and compares them to Aristotle's city-states. He argues that like Aristotle, who claimed that one cannot discuss the nature of a morally good person without discussing the social conditions that develop and sustain such persons, we cannot discuss good persons in organizations if we do not address organizations. Good organizations, Goodpaster suggests, should provide the social conditions that develop and sustain morally good people, for the sake of themselves and their stakeholders. To achieve this, he prescribes that organizations should ensure that neither the formulation nor the implementation of policy undermines the ethical beliefs of their employees, and they must ensure the communication of their ethical standards. Both of these responsibilities require the organization to respect the dignity and moral autonomy of each employee (Goodpaster, 1989, p 95).

Beach (1990) outlines that the organizational influence is exercised by dividing tasks among its members, establishing standard practices, transmitting objectives, providing communication channels and training and indoctrinating its members with knowledge, skill and loyalties. These influences "allow them to make the decisions the organization wants made in the way the organization wants them made" (p 11). As such the organization provides both the ends and the means of decisions and behavior. The organization also affects the locus of choice on decision-making (Vaughan, 1998). The organization as a social context shapes what a person perceives as rational at any given moment. The specialization and division of labor that occurs in organizations may make people in organizations unable to see the illegality and immorality of certain actions. Each action is a part of a chain of actions, and even though each individual act may be legitimate and moral, all the actions linked together may constitute an illegal or immoral activity, which each individual participant may be ignorant of.

As a result of the organizational influence, employees in organizations do not function as highly individualistic ethical decision-makers (Fraedrich, Thorne, & Ferrell, 1994, p. 835). Instead they act as occupants of roles, and as subjects of rules, rather than persons (Nesteruk, 1991). As a result, "Rarely do the character flaws of a lone actor fully explain corporate misconduct. More typically, unethical business practice involves the tacit, if not explicit, cooperation of others,

and reflects the values, attitudes, beliefs, language, and behavioral patterns that define an organization's operating culture" (Sharp Paine, 1994, p. 106). Individuals acting together can produce morally objectionable events and states of affairs that no individual acting alone could produce (McMahon, 1995). The division of responsibility and the anonymity that togetherness provides, enables regression of the standards individuals may hold as persons.

According to this view, organizations have to possess ethical values and communicate these values to their members in order to behave ethically. They must develop an ethical climate and have formal systems that are congruent with the informal elements of the organization.

The other extreme view sees the organization as the outcome of the people that populate it and their interaction. Schneider's (1987) Attraction – Selection – Attrition (ASA) process exemplifies this view. This process perceives the organizations' structure, processes and technology as caused by ASA and not as its determinants. Organizations, according to Schneider, when viewed as situations containing patterned behavior and as environments characterized by the coordinated activities of interdependent parts, including interdependent people, are environments which are a function of persons behaving in them. People are thus responsible for their choices in terms of employers and organizations they accept, and are not randomly assigned to organizations, because it is through their voluntary action that they become members of their chosen organization. This is supported by the view which argues that the acceptance of a contract, such as the employment contract, in the absence of force or fraud obliges the parties to the contract to morally comply or quit accordingly (Hartman, 1998). In this view, it is not the organization that affects the individual; the individual chooses to be part of the organization.

Bell and Staw (1989) also voice their antithesis to the organizational literature that is based on socialization, and views individuals as passive and malleable. Socialization is "the process by which an individual comes to understand the values, abilities, expected behaviors, and social knowledge that are essential for assuming an organizational role and for participating as an organization member" (Louis, 1980 cited in Chatman, 1991, p. 462). Frequently individuals are portrayed as "lumps of clay" (Bell and Staw, 1989, p. 232) that join

organizations, ready to be shaped by coworkers, superiors and mentors. Bell and Staw propose that the influence the organization has on the individual or the individual's on the organization, depends on the situational strength. They argue that some organizations are weak or ambiguous and enable individual dispositions to be expressed. Bell and Staw concede that conformity exists in organizations but its degree and frequency have been inflated in the literature. They do not think that personality will dominate the work situation, but they do think that when measured properly, individualization and not homogenization can be found in work situations. They also argue that socialization and its related forces, such as role taking, and social influence are not capable of eliminating the idiosyncrasies that individuals bring into the organization. Bell and Staw propose that if a person cannot control and predict behavior and outcomes, the person will withdraw from the organization or enter a state of learned helplessness.

Ethics and Integrity in Recruitment

Organizations are intensifying their efforts to improve their ethics (Sharp Paine, 1996).

Kaptein (1999) suggests that to manage organizational integrity it is necessary to provide clear expectations to employees that they are required to make responsible choices about integrity issues, and to provide consistent and unambiguous expectations of behavior. It is also necessary to enable people to make moral judgements in organizations and not merely to offer instructions that aim to guide behavior (Kjonstad & Willmott, 1995), as most organizations do.

Business organizations' climate and culture contain values and goals. These values and goals develop the reputation of the organization (Dickson, Smith, Grojean, & Ehrhart, 2001). This reputation then, argue Dickson et al, serves as a catalyst for Schneider's (1987) Attraction – Selection – Attrition (ASA) process. The reputation of the organization affects the intention to pursue employment with the given organization. Kaptein (1998) uses the term reputation as synonymous with moral trustworthiness and explains it as the "stakeholders' perception of the company's conscience" (p. 11), including correctness, sincerity, integrity, meticulousness and fairness.

Corporate Social Performance (CSP) is an evaluation of the degree to which organizations meet their social responsibilities (Albinger Schmidt & Freeman, 2000).   In the study conducted by Albinger Schmidt and Freeman it was found that the CSP is highly correlated to how attractive potential candidates find employers for people with increased job choice. These and the findings reported earlier indicate that communicating values and ethics in recruitment advertisements, together with an ethical organizational reputation, is likely to increase the attractiveness of the employer to potential job seekers, thus providing a competitive advantage to the organization in terms of recruitment.   Attracting people with congruent values also eliminates the possibility of "bad apples" (Trevino & Youngblood, 1990) entering the organization.

Greening and Turban (2000) found that applicants would be attracted to firms with positive Corporate Social Performance (CSP) reputations.   They will pursue jobs with such firms, will attempt to interview with such firms, and will have a higher probability of accepting a job offer from these firms.   These findings, suggest the authors, have implications for organizational competitive advantage.

Organizational integrity goes beyond compliance.   Integrity is founded on self-governance based on principles and is driven by ethics (Sharp Paine, 1994).   Organizational commitment to integrity has been found to lead to competitiveness, positive work morale and sustainable relationships with key stakeholders by Sharp Paine.

Empirically, it has been found that 82 per cent of professionals in the United Kingdom would not work for an organization, which had values they did not share (Anonymous, 2001).   The same study by the Industrial Society reports that more than half of the respondents reported that they chose the company they work for because they believe in what it does and what it stands for.   This study also found that the responsible behavior of the potential employer is an important criterion for almost everyone.

The literature provides compelling support for the notion that decision makers should carefully consider outsider perceptions of the ethical precepts in their organizations.   Organizational ethical behavior and reputation improves the quantity and quality of potential organizational members.   Little research attention, however, has been paid to practical aspects of this issue, despite the potential for significant improvements in organizational effectiveness. This exploratory research

seeks to assess the organizational communication to potential employees in terms of its ethics and related concepts.

Method and Sample

Data were obtained from a large on-line recruitment organization that targeted employment vacancies in Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Fiji. Initially, all vacancies that had been posted over a fourteen day period were examined. Part-time, short-term contract, and temporary vacancies were ignored, as it was considered that organizations might be more concerned about applicants' skills than other considerations for these vacancies.   Vacancies in countries outside Australia were also ignored, leaving a total of 2885 job advertisements. Since the purpose of the study was to identify only those advertisements that specified issues relating to ethics and integrity, a keyword search on the words "ethical" or "ethics" or "integrity" was conducted. This search identified 108 advertisements that met the criteria.   Each of these advertisements was examined to ensure that they were using the key words to convey ethical expectations of applicants or some similar sentiment.   Sixteen vacancies involved integrity of data, integrity of process, or integrity of physical assets. These cases were not considered further, leaving 92 cases remaining.

Each of these cases was then examined in detail to see if the advertisement specified a requirement for ethical behavior or if they simply described the organization or its environment as ethical. Each case was also examined to see if a "results orientation" was required, or if experience, skills, or qualifications were considered important.   This was done to discover whether or not there was any emphasis on, or balance between, ethical behavior and achievement of results. Finally, cases were classified into nine broad categories to detect any variance based on industry or profession.

Findings

Table 1

Contains a summary of the findings. Overall, only 92 cases (3.2% of total advertisement) made any mention of ethics or integrity.

	Ethical organization/ environment	*Ethical person required*	*Results orientation required*	*Skills & experience required*	*Total Adverts*
Medical	56			56	214
Sales & Marketing	9	4	4	11	446
Finance & Banking	4	4		8	338
Management & Administration	3	4	1	7	345
Accounting & Auditing		3		3	433
Information Technology		3	1	3	409
Government		1	1	1	33
Engineering		1		1	225
Other					442
Total	**72**	**20**	**7**	**90**	**2885**

Table 1 – Summary of Findings

In 72 cases (2.5% of total advertisements) the word ethical was used to describe the culture of the organization or the environment in which it operates. The majority of these cases were in the medical category, with 56 relating to vacancies in the hospital sector in one Australian state. All of these cases contained a standard sentence in small print at the end of the advertisement referring to the ethical environment in which the organization operated. These 56 cases represented 26.2% of all advertisements in the medical category. While all of these positions required relevant skills, experience or qualifications, ethical behavior was not specifically required of the applicant in a single case, nor was there any requirement for a results orientation. Other job categories that described the organization's culture or environment as ethical included sales and marketing (9 cases or 2.0%), finance and banking (4 cases or 1.2%), and management and administration (3 cases or 0.9%).

In only twenty cases (0.7% of total advertisements), the advertisement specifically required ethical behavior or integrity from applicants. The requirement for ethical behavior was not confined to any particular profession, and was a requirement in eight of the nine job categories.

Seven of the 92 cases examined in detail (7.6%) required a "results orientation" from the applicant. This requirement was most common in sales and marketing vacancies. In 90 of the 92 advertisements, qualifications, knowledge, or experience were required.

Other aspects of the content of advertisements varied considerably. For example, some vacancies in regional areas explained in detail the attractions of the locality. Others were very specific about the organizational structure and reporting arrangements. Some provided a lot of information about the objectives of the organization. Many stressed the need for the successful applicant to be capable of building and sustaining relationships. Most of the advertisements examined used emotive language, with expressions such as "exciting opportunity", "dynamic team", "highly motivated professional with innovation, flare and imagination" being very common. Public sector advertisements invariably provided details about salary, whereas private sector advertisements provided an indicative salary and benefits package, or did not mention remuneration at all.

Discussion

The findings of this research indicate that most Australian organizations do not address the issue of ethics and integrity in their recruitment advertisements. This finding can be explained by addressing the two positions that were outlined earlier. Organizations may assume that people possess high ethical standards and these standards are not affected by the context, thus there is no reason to address the ethicality of potential recruits. The number of organizations that have codes of ethics and conduct and ethics programs however makes this possibility unlikely.

The other possibility is that ethics and ethical reputation are not a major concern for Australian organizations. This appears to be a more likely position, based on the findings of this research. Australian

organizations in their recruitment communications appear concerned with finding the right skills and experiences to fill positions. This supports the observation made by Werhane (1999) that employees are perceived as economic phenomena and as such are treated and measured in quantitative terms rather than in individualized terms. Organizations according to this dominant perspective, Werhane claims, do not hire, promote, transfer, layoff, and fire people so much as job skills, productivity, fit with the organization, retrainability and performance.

The majority of the employees that will be selected from the recruitment advertisements examined in this instance may be told something about ethics and the code upon entering the employing organizations. What is likely to be promoted in employees however may be cynicism and lack of trust. Trust is difficult to establish but it provides referent power to people who are trusted (Ciulla, 2002). Ciulla uses Hollander's (1958) concept of idiosyncratic credits as an outcome of trusted leadership. Idiosyncratic credits enable leaders to deviate form the norm because they are trusted by people. Such credits give leaders the latitude to make changes that are accepted and found acceptable by the followers. However, trust is only given to individuals who are perceived to be morally good persons and morally good leaders. Being trustworthy is not something that can be faked. It has to be an authentic element of the organization and its leaders' behavior for it to be perceived as such and for trust to be given to it and them.

The unauthentic leads to cynicism and lack of trust. Organizations need to ensure that they communicate ethics, both in terms of expectations of ethical behavior as well as their own ethical stature to potential employees. This is going to improve their recruitment effectiveness. Beyond this instrumental outcome, an ethical organization thinks and talks and acts ethics. It has an ethical reputation and is trusted by current and potential employees. This trust is built on an authentic ethical reputation.

The employment advertisement and the reputation of the organization affects the image created in the minds of potential candidates, and subsequently their decision to apply for and accept employment. By excluding ethics, organizations may disadvantage themselves and limit their competitive advantage by not communicating effectively, thus limiting the pool of appropriate candidates and diluting the moral language that creates criteria

enabling the ethics or the organization to develop. The absence of ethics cues from job advertisements and the emphasis on instrumentality communicates an egoistic orientation, which by definition excludes ethics. In addition, the emphasis on egoistic ends for the applicant as well further reinforces the instrumental goals of the organization.

Conclusion

This study has examined empirically some aspects of ethical organizational behavior not previously reported in the literature. Despite widespread agreement surrounding the importance of ethical standards, the study found that most organizations make little effort to communicate ethical requirements to potential employees. In addition there is very limited communication in regard to the ethical climate and values of the employing organization. These findings indicate that the great majority of organizations seeking new members are disadvantaging themselves by not addressing an issue potential employees find significant. This absence also affects the authenticity of organizations' ethics.

Some limitations of the study should be noted. Firstly, although the initial sample was quite large, (N=2885) all data were collected from one source over a fourteen day period. Further research is needed to determine whether or not the findings of this study are consistent with job advertisements over a longer period of time, in other media, and indeed in other countries. Secondly, no input was sought from the recruitment professionals who drafted the vacancy advertisements. It may be that additional insights into the reasoning of employers can be obtained from such input. This may lead to the development of techniques and strategies that could be used by organizations to communicate their ethical messages to potential employees, and to other stakeholders in the community.

It may also be useful to examine recruitment advertisements prior to the recent organizational misbehavior epidemic and the differences between industries and sectors. It is also expected that the increased regulatory activity that seeks to impose ethical behavior on organizations is likely to increase the communication about ethics in recruitment efforts, like the Equal Employment Opportunity regulations have done in the past. This study provides a foundation for further inquiry into organizational ethics in recruitment, beyond the issue of fairness that has

to date been addressed. It enables further development of the goal based empirical theory (Golembiewski, 1965) of business ethics by clarifying what is desirable and how it can be achieved.

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