

BOT LUCK

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The question of how technology is transforming the face of recruitment is a hot topic of debate. For applicants, the extent of this transformation can come as a shock, especially if they are coming cold to the modern recruitment experience.

To see this, we are going to tell the story of Jo, who recently applied for a middle level position at a public body – her first such application for many years.

The job advertisement she saw on the internet was reassuringly familiar. It described the job and the organisation, set out the appointment criteria, and asked for a covering letter and CV. Being able to submit the documents on-line was welcome news. It was going to save her the hassle of printing stuff out, mailing it, worrying about whether it might get lost in the post. She didn't like it that the advertisement contained no contact details: no number to call, no person to email if she had a question. But, Jo thought, maybe that's just the way things are done now.

Her feelings as she pressed the *Apply* button were also familiar. Applying for a job means taking a risk, exposing yourself to rejection. It also means having hope, of a new life doing new things with new people, of the possibilities that come with a bump in salary.

No doubt, she thought, it would be some time before she heard back, and certainly not until after the closing date. After all, the story she had presented in her application reflected her decades as an adult. The time she had spent experimenting with different careers. The period away from work caring for her family. Her break to recover from illness. Plenty there for the reader to make sense of and weigh up against the other applications.

Jo assumed her application would be decided on by someone trained in the art of interpreting complex information, a people person who was curious about what made people tick and the different career paths they followed.

An hour and a half later came an email from *The Resourcing Team*. Her application had been reviewed. The Team was sorry but wouldn't be taking it further. The Team knew this would be disappointing news. The Team offered thanks for the time and effort that went into her application.

There was no contact information in the email. *This email box is not monitored. Please do not reply to this message.*

The recruiting organisation hadn't revealed anything about what the decision process was going to involve, either in the advertisement for the job or (as far as Jo could see) on its website. Taken aback and wanting explanations, Jo tried to reconstruct the process by which she had been turned down for the job in double quick time.

The three possibilities

As Jo came to understand it, her application could have been decided on in one of three ways.

The first was by human intelligence only. Digital communication has speeded up decision-making in ways that would have been unimaginable to job seekers in the pre-digital age. The slow pace of that time may have given the impression that hirers used to spend more time reading and thinking about job applications than they do today. But that is to confuse time burned up on logistics with time devoted to deliberation. It is possible that hirers now spend *more* time deliberating on job applications than ever before. Jo's application may just have gone straight to the hiring team, who proceeded to spend a portion of the next hour and a half deliberating on it before delivering their verdict.

Provided the decision was taken with the right degree of care – all evidence was viewed through the prism of the advertised criteria, an effort was made to make sense of the life story being told through the application – Jo could feel reasonably satisfied and respected at the end of it. The tone of the rejection email was courteous, sympathetic, and sincere, all of which reflected well on the employer.

She couldn't know for sure, but the speed with which her application was decided upon suggested a second possibility, namely, that the hiring team was assisted by some form of automated recruitment software.

The ability to capitalise on technological breakthroughs is the mark of a healthy, forward-thinking organisation. New technology doesn't just fix old problems. It can bring about radical improvements in how things are done. When it comes to recruitment exercises, automated software offers the prospect of vastly accelerating the decision-making process at the same time as improving its quality, especially where there are hundreds, possibly thousands, of applications for a job.

So, if the decision about Jo's application were made by human intelligence mixed in with tech, she felt she shouldn't see anything sinister in that nor assume the decision would have been different had it been determined by human intelligence alone.

The third possibility was that no human intelligence had been directly involved in deciding on Jo's application. Her covering letter and CV, along with the other information she provided in her on-line application, were never seen by a flesh and blood person. The hour and a half from application to rejection was simply the time it took for the automated software to do its stuff.

Getting in tune with the modern recruitment experience

Jo felt that the modern application experience had plenty going for it. It was quick and convenient. If this were down to new recruitment technology, more power to it. She

certainly did not romanticise the old way of doing things. Pressure on hiring teams meant many covering letters and CVs ended up being looked at for no more than a few seconds. Some were not looked at all. Boredom and tiredness were never far away. How closely an application was reviewed depended on the time of day, the blood sugar levels of those doing the reading, how distracted they happened to be. In the desperation to get the number of applications down to short-list size, prejudices (large and small) and spurious rules of thumb could very soon take the place of sober and impartial deliberation.

Automated software doesn't have good days and bad. It doesn't get tired or bored or devote too much time to one application and not enough to another. It didn't go to the same university as any of the applicants, it hasn't *known people like that*. It doesn't overlook pages or miss words or muddle one CV up with another. It puts the same amount of time into reviewing each application.

Seen in this light, Jo could understand why some saw recruitment tech as the most impartial and egalitarian reviewer of her accomplishments and credentials she could have hoped for. Until now, hirers had been hamstrung in their ability to be impartial on a mass scale. Automated software allowed them to make that leap.

And, yet. Applying for a job would mean something different to her from now on. She would need to readjust, emotionally and tactically.

Her first adjustment would be to present herself in a different way. Knowing what she felt she knew now, Jo would have made her covering letter and CV less *personal*. Having thought that *being herself* in a job application was a good thing, she now worried it had been her undoing. Her CV had been honest about breaks in career for illness and family. Her covering letter had been heartfelt. She had tried to make use of synonyms and expressive turns of phrase.

Perhaps she was naïve to believe that such a personal approach would play well even with a fellow human being. The thought that her words could have been filtered through automated software strengthened those doubts. She wondered what sense *the tech* would have made of the language she had used to describe her fit with the job criteria. She would know better for next time. She would take her lead from the recruitment tech that applicants themselves can get hold of, make sure the right keywords were in her application, follow the formatting tips, find a way of being more generic – though not so generic as to blend in with the mass of applicants who were *also* using tech to make their pitch.

To Jo, these were important but puzzling conclusions. She had thought that, in the future, the most valuable employees would be those who were able to do and see things that automation could not. If an employee were merely mimicking the tech, they might as well be replaced by it. She had heard that the cognitive virtues of the workplace of tomorrow would be uniqueness, creativity, insight. And yet many of the recruitment systems she had subsequently researched appeared to push in the opposite direction, towards conformity and uniformity – of language, presentation, experience even.

Her second adjustment was about emotional recalibration – about investing less of herself and expecting less of others (or even expecting there to *be* any others). In applying for the job, she had known she was dealing with a bureaucracy: it was a largeish public body after all. But even bureaucracies can be chipped away at to reveal a person you can talk to or email. What she had come up against was something quite different – something closed, wilfully anonymous.

This email box is not monitored. Please do not reply to this message. There was not much give and take in those words. She was, she thought, dealing with an emotional void. She had to assume that the next organisation she applied to would also hide itself from applicants, offer no prospect of feedback, make itself unfathomable. She might never get to put a name to a member of a Resourcing Team.

The email telling her that her application would not be taken further came across as sensitive to her feelings of rejection. But if there were no *someone* in the chain of decision-making – if it had been fully automated – these words began to sound hollow to her, like receiving condolences from a pocket calculator. Words in themselves were not what moved and consoled her. It was the thought *behind them* that counted – the thought of someone who could put themselves in her shoes, who knew what it was to experience life's highs and lows (of which applying for a job is most certainly one).

The effort to humanise technology, Jo felt, could easily become an exercise in concealment for the benefit of an employer rather than one of gracious etiquette for the benefit of the job applicant.

Jo's third adjustment would be to take nothing for granted about the recruitment experience and what was going on beneath the surface. Looking back at her application, she felt she had been playing a game whose rules she hadn't understood. Ideas that were common knowledge to some – that recruitment tech plays an increasingly important role in assessing job applications, that applicants can get hold of software that will reveal what software employers are using and steer them towards the content and layout that software is looking for in applications, that the whole process of applying for jobs had the air of a technology-driven game of cat and mouse – came as a surprise to her.

Perhaps technological sophistication was a more important requirement of the job than she had picked up from the reassuringly familiar way in which it was described in the advertisement. Perhaps the application process itself contained an unstated test – a test of initiative in which *she* should have figured out how to present herself in ways best suited to the decision-making system, *she* should have realised that she was being asked to include her LinkedIn URL for a reason. Nothing, she now saw, had been asked for in vain.

Her fourth adjustment was to the possibility that, if recruitment tech were being used, the odds were more stacked against her than she had realised. There was, she felt, a lot of talk about how *objective* the tech was but much less understanding of what the word meant. The claim that the tech is objective because it isn't influenced by personal feelings or opinions often just seemed another way of saying that it isn't a person. A

cloud formation isn't a person either, but we don't look to the skies for an objective view of a job application.

And if you allow that the tech was *created* by a person, you must also allow that it incorporates their biases and omissions. An outcome might be unbiased within the frame of reference that generates it but biased in the grander scheme of things. A roulette wheel is not biased between the numbers that appear on it. But it is very much biased against the numbers that don't appear on it. The danger is of the tech being objective only *within* the rules and limitations written into it. Being objective is not the same thing as being *right*.

Much is made of the software's capacity to open up the job market to all-comers, to break down exclusions, to eliminate personal prejudice. But, from Jo's perspective, the use of the tech was biased – at the very least towards the technologically savvy, the ones who know how to use tech to play the recruitment system. That demographic, in turn, is concentrated in the younger generation of job seekers.

Work in progress

The moral of Jo's story is not that the recruitment experience of today is one thing and one thing only. The next job application she submits might be handled quite differently.

Hers is a tale of someone catching up with a new world of recruitment – more automated than the one she grew up with, more stripped bare. She wanted to blame technology for the things about it she hadn't liked – the anonymity, above all else. True, automation comes with the risk of this. But she knew that anonymity in a recruitment process may have nothing to do with automation and everything to do with a very human decision to avoid accountability. The two issues are separate, even if facelessness adds insult to the injury of being rejected for a job by a piece of software.

Jo used to think of applying for a job as an exercise in handicraft and good manners. She now saw it as more like trying to break the code of a system of mass production (by applicants) and mass consumption (by employers).

The whole experience had forced Jo to look in the mirror. It had made her ask what she expected of herself and what she expected of the world. Part of her disappointment was the feeling that, when it came to participating in the job market, she had been a model citizen. She had waited her turn for the right job to come up. When it did, she had applied for it in a spirit of seriousness.

There were, she realised, elements both of passivity and entitlement in her way of thinking. She wanted her ideal job to be served up on a plate. But she also wanted to be able to apply for it on *her* terms, telling her story as *she* wanted it to be told.

If the world of job applications really was now one of mass production, it was also one of mass information and mass communication. She could see something liberating in this. Instead of waiting for things to happen, she could figure out how to play the new

recruitment system, technology and all, and showcase her job credentials. The robots used by employers and recruiters could be made to work *for* her, not against her.

But the new world of recruitment had its blind spots. Jo's view of the public body she had applied to went from being enthusiastic (it was why she was so keen to work there in the first place) to being deeply negative. It wasn't because it had turned her down – she's a grown up, she gets that job competitions have winners and losers – but because of what the recruitment system revealed about the organisation's attitudes. That it was impersonal, anonymous, closed – all very far from the champion of the consumer it portrayed itself as being. The recruitment system she had dealt with may indeed have been state of the art. But she scored it C- as a public relations tool.

More deeply, she was confused by the ethics of the modern recruitment experience and where the values of disclosure and foreseeability fitted in. She felt she was entitled to know the rules of the game she was playing. Otherwise, she would be back in the world the recruitment technology was meant to be helping us move away from: a world of in-groups who know what buttons to press with employers and out-groups who are flying blind.

She could see what employers were up against. Revealing too much of their hand restricts their room for manoeuvre, opens them up to legal challenges, and encourages a game of technological tit for tat with applicants. Publicising their use of automated software may put some strong applicants off. And employers themselves may be at the mercy of the producers of the software when it comes to understanding its inner workings.

But if the recruitment technology really is all it is cracked up to be in terms of impartiality, employers should be proud to reveal how they use it, not anxious to keep their use of it a secret – particularly if it is a secret that off the shelf software can crack. Either the tech offers a genuinely objective evaluation of job applications or it doesn't. If it does, applicants like Jo would benefit from feedback on how they ranked against others in the field, to help them do better next time around. If the tech doesn't offer objectivity, many of the more high-minded arguments for it start to slip away.

Of course, advocates for the tech are not blinded by it. Many see it as coming into its own in undertaking data-gathering tasks that allow large numbers of applications to be narrowed down to a short-list, leaving human intelligence to take over at the point where data have to be corroborated, understandings tested, and soft skills assessed. Meanwhile, the technology is evolving. Today's limitations may be gone tomorrow. And, to repeat, there is no heyday when human intelligence was able to sift large quantities of job application data without any slip-ups.

But the danger is of creating a new recruitment world that, to paraphrase the late American philosopher John Rawls, mistakes impersonality for impartiality – and which sets up applicants like Jo for an experience that feels like speed-dating a robot who then gives you the silent treatment.