



HIRING PRACTICES AND WORKING LEARNER SUCCESS IN THE LEARNING ECONOMY

Dr. Franci Phelan and Dr. Randal Peters
Edited by Sarah Blanchard Kyte, Ph.D.



INTRODUCTION

WORKING AND LEARNING IN THE LEARNING ECONOMY

The learning economy demands that employers and individuals alike engage in ongoing adaptive strategies to maintain a competitive advantage in the face of rapid change and economic uncertainty (Archibugi & Lundvall, 2002; Lundvall & Johnson, 1994). In this context, employers seeking to maximize their human resources are incentivized to develop hiring practices aimed at securing candidates with a demonstrated commitment to lifelong learning. Accordingly, individuals who are the most prepared and motivated to continue developing their competencies over the course of their careers might expect a competitive advantage.

Yet, for working learners—individuals engaged simultaneously with both work and education—the pursuit of educational credentials, skills, and training may be at odds with their ability to provide for themselves and their families through work (Carnevale, Smith, Melton, & Price, 2015). Instead of a competitive advantage, this growing pool of applicants may experience barriers to employment via the hiring practices firms use to select candidates. Taken together, national economic competitiveness (Blivin & Mayo, 2013), the vitality of firms (Brown, 2015), and the career and life satisfaction of a growing share of workers (ACT Foundation, 2014), will depend on the alignment between organizational practices in hiring and the needs of young working learners. Despite the high stakes to both employers and working learners, exactly how contemporary hiring practices impact working learners remains an open question thus far unexplored by empirical research.

In this spirit, we identify how today's hiring practices help or hinder the economic success of young working learners. In doing so, we draw on a robust series of interviews with human resource leaders from eleven firms of various sizes. These firms span a wide array of economic sectors, organizational models, and workplace cultures. Our approach allows us to unpack how these firms and their human resource professionals seek to source, select, and hire talent and the implications of these dynamics for the prospects of young working learners. We find that conformity among employers in their commitment to a narrow set of traditional approaches to hiring, results in three key areas of conflict between contemporary hiring practices and the needs of young working learners. Because implementing practices that meet the needs of both working learners and the nation's employers is imperative to the success of each, we conclude by identifying key areas of intervention aimed at aligning hiring practices with working learner success in the learning economy.

RESEARCH AIMS



This investigation is guided by the following research question. In the context of the learning economy, what are the implications of contemporary human resource practices relating to sourcing, selecting, and hiring talent, for young working learners? In answering this question, we identify commonalities in these dynamics across a range of organizations of varying sizes, structures, and workplace cultures. Finally, we pay special attention to the policies and incentives that guide these processes and the extent to which they may facilitate success or serve as barriers for young working learners.



METHODOLOGY

To achieve these aims, we conducted in-depth interviews with human resource leaders at eleven organizations that range widely in firm size, industry, and geographic location in the United States (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). Our interviewees were responsible for decisions regarding sourcing, selecting, and hiring talent for their respective firms and thus could provide the best insight into these practices at a variety of organizations. From the information they shared with us, we are able to identify common practices and challenges in hiring that are most salient to working learners as they navigate the process.



SAMPLE DESIGN AND CHARACTERISTICS

We developed our sample through a purposeful sampling strategy that took into consideration the characteristics of both the human resource professionals who served as interviewees in our study and their organizations (Creswell, 2007). The lead author's established career and doctoral training in human resources offered a wide network of contacts at numerous firms across the U.S. Through this network—including direct contacts and referrals—individuals at eleven prominent firms of varying sizes were recruited to participate in the study. Interviewees were chosen based on their role and tenure in the organization, access to the head of human resources, size of company, and industry. Efforts were made to interview the human resource leader most responsible for the hiring process and its impact. Moreover, all interviewees were required to have at least two years of employment within their current organization to ensure in-depth knowledge of hiring procedures and challenges.

As a group, the interviewees selected all had post-graduate degrees and more than eight years of experience working in human resources. At the time of their interviews, participants were acting as vice presidents, senior vice presidents, directors, or CEOs in industries including financial services, technology, retail, and others. Companies ranged in size from large (more than 5000 employees), to medium (500-4999 employees), and small (less than 500 employees) organizations. Lastly, the organizations were headquartered predominantly in the Midwest and most operated across the U.S. or worldwide. Table 1 provides a detailed view of the characteristics of organizations and interviewees that participated in the study.

TABLE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF ORGANIZATIONS AND INTERVIEWEES

Size	Industry	Headquarters	Operations	Interviewee
Large	Financial services	Midwest	Worldwide	VP – Human Resources
Large	Agriculture and biotech	Midwest	Worldwide	Director – Human Resources & Operations
Medium	Banking	Midwest	Nationwide	VP – Human Resources
Medium	Stone and quarrying	East coast	East coast	VP – Human Resources
Medium	Retail and transportation company (family owned)	Midwest	Midwest, Western U.S.	Director – Human Resources & Employment
Small	Education nonprofit	East coast	Midwest	CEO
Medium	Financial services	Midwest	Nationwide	VP – Human Resources
Small	Technology start-up	Midwest	Worldwide	Director – Human Resources
Medium	Insurance	Midwest	Nationwide	SVP – Human Resources
Large	Consumer lending and financial services	Midwest	Nationwide	SVP – Human Resources
Large	Data and telecom systems	Midwest	Nationwide	VP – Human Resources



METHODOLOGY

INTERVIEWING RESPONDENTS

Interviews were conducted over a five-month period in 2015 via in-person interviews or teleconferencing in sessions lasting 45 to 60 minutes, on average. These followed an interview protocol (Appendix A) with a series of open-ended questions. A core set of questions asked interviewees directly about the organization, the hiring process and its adoption, and the criteria used in making hiring decisions. In addition, a number of supplemental questions addressed economic, social, cultural, and historical aspects of leadership decisions and the effectiveness of hiring strategies and procedures. The supplemental questions allowed us to make the most of each respondent's expertise. Interviews were digitally recorded with the interviewee's permission and the recordings were professionally transcribed verbatim. Although we provided copies of each transcript to the interviewees for clarification and comments, no changes were requested and respondents largely expressed enthusiasm for the study and its importance.



DATA ANALYSIS

We analyzed the wealth of data within our transcripts to identify emergent themes through an iterative, qualitative process aimed at identifying the implications of current human resource practices for young working learners (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007). First, we generated a set of initial codes to identify patterns within the transcripts and over time, our coding system grew in detail. We refined these codes through critical reflection, feedback from colleagues, and by reviewing relevant scholarly and professional literature. An Excel spreadsheet was used to strengthen the process of data analysis by examining the frequency and patterning of various codes. Finally, a central set of themes emerged from this process that collectively provide a portrait of contemporary human resource practices with implications for young working learners.



FINDINGS

We set out to examine the implications of contemporary hiring practices for young working learners. The human resource leaders that we interviewed provided a wealth of knowledge about how organizations source, select, and hire new talent, as well as their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities therein. Moreover, although our interviewees were enthusiastic about the attention to young working learners at the center of our project and the untapped potential of this group, we uncovered little evidence that firms are taking the unique circumstances or strengths of young working learners into account in any meaningful way during the hiring processes.

Nevertheless, after briefly presenting our findings about contemporary hiring practices in general, we are able to extrapolate beyond the data to consider the implications of these practices for young working learners. In doing so, we find three critical areas of tension between these hiring practices and the needs and potential of working learners. By leveraging the insights from our interviews, we gain a deeper understanding of these issues and provide evidence-based directions for innovation around hiring to benefit young working learners and organizations alike.



HIRING PRACTICES CHARACTERIZED BY CONFORMITY DESPITE CHALLENGES

The most striking finding to emerge from our interviews with human resource leaders was the large degree of uniformity in the hiring process that each described. Despite a wide range of available options, companies engaged in largely the same procedures to source, select, and hire talent regardless of the size and industry of the company or the role being filled. We now review this process as well as our interviewees' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities that it presents.

When an organization decides to make a job opening available, the early stages of the hiring process concern how and where to source talent. First, the hiring manager and recruiting professional establish a hiring timeline, decide who should be involved, and develop a job description including the responsibilities, educational and professional qualifications, and competencies required of applicants, as well as whether any behavioral or cultural assessments will be required as part of the application process.

Next, this team decides where to circulate the opening by considering various relevant websites, college campuses, networks, and job boards. Building relationships is by far the most frequently identified strategy for sourcing candidates; current employees

are encouraged and sometimes offered incentives to reach out to their respective professional networks to identify candidates. Additionally, a high priority is placed on generating a diverse pool of candidates. All of the interviewees we spoke with emphasized the need for greater gender and ethnic diversity within their organizations. To achieve this, firms target job boards and professional organizations specific to underrepresented communities as well as minority-serving colleges and universities. Taken together, job openings are typically circulated using a three-pronged approach: (1) through various digital but largely conventional forums, (2) through the social networks of current employees, and (3) through avenues targeting underrepresented minority talent.

Throughout the process, employers prioritize using tools and techniques to get open positions filled by qualified candidates as quickly as possible. For example, employers use technology to source applicants and to manage the application process where possible, as evidenced by the ubiquity of online job postings and applicant tracking systems (ATS). Yet, our interviewees reported that phone screenings and in-person interviews are still invariably the primary activity used to select and hire talent.



HIRING PRACTICES CHARACTERIZED BY CONFORMITY DESPITE CHALLENGES (CONTINUED)

Once the review of applications is underway, hiring professionals conduct an initial screen of applicants to establish which candidates will be interviewed in person by one or more employees. The aim of these screenings and interviews is to identify not only which candidates possess the technical expertise required but also the soft skills, personality, and competencies to thrive. All of the interviewees emphasized the importance of in-person interviews for evaluating whether candidates are a good cultural fit with the organization, meaning that they share the common values and working styles of others in the organizational environment. Finally, input is gathered from all employees participating in the hiring process and any remaining screens are conducted—including background checks, professional references, and educational credentials—before a decision is made and a written job offer is extended to the most qualified candidate.

Although the procedures through which hiring takes place are strikingly similar across firms, we observed that the challenges our interviewees described vary considerably from one organization to the next. In general, three types of challenges emerged from our interviews. First, sourcing sufficient talent to meet the specifications of the position is often a challenge. Interviewees described shrinking talent pools due to declines in entry into particular industries as well as talent loss due to aging segments of the workforce. Additionally, firms struggle to compete for talent in the face of demanding work or travel burdens and limitations in the compensation and benefits they can offer prospective hires. Second, some interviewees reported difficulty identifying the best educational prerequisites and competencies to use in hiring and in the absence of clarity in these criteria, hiring tends to focus on prior professional experiences instead. Lastly, maintaining momentum over the entire duration of the hiring process is a struggle as hiring is frequently burdensome to employees' time and energy.

Despite these challenges, the human resource leaders we spoke with expressed a commitment to improving their sourcing, selection, and hiring processes. They cited the necessity of overcoming the barriers described earlier for pursuing initiatives such as strategic growth. However, in terms of improving the hiring process, nearly all employers in this study stated they have limited metrics available to evaluate the effectiveness of their hiring processes. Rather, evaluations of the hiring process typically focus on the bottom line of how long it takes to fill a position and how many applications are evaluated. The professionals we spoke with expressed a need for a broader, ongoing review of the hiring process in terms of its success in accurately identifying the skills and competencies needed for a given role, effectively identifying the strongest candidates through the interview process, and managing the flow of applicants in a cost-effective way.

Taken together, our interviews shed important light on contemporary hiring practices as well as challenges facing human resource leaders. Despite the large amount of conformity across firms to a narrow set of hiring practices, organizations struggle to efficiently source a sufficiently wide pool of talent. In the context of the learning economy, matching the competencies, credentials, and experiences needed to fulfill open positions is no easy task. However, human resource leaders are invested in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of hiring processes.



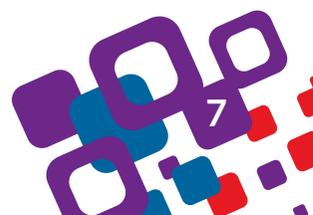
IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUNG WORKING LEARNERS: OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Over the course of conducting our interviews with human resource leaders, few direct connections between hiring practices and the issues facing young working learners arose in our conversations. Yet, we are able to connect the dots between what our interviewees shared with us and their implications for young working learners. In doing so, our findings reveal three tensions between contemporary hiring practices and the position of young working learners in the learning economy: the conformity in an age of innovation; the shifting paradigm of education and work as separate and sequential; and achieving greater diversity through young working learner inclusion. At present, these tensions appear to place additional obstacles in front of young working learners on their way to career success. However, addressing them offers the opportunity to facilitate the overall work and life satisfaction of this growing group and contribute to the economic competitiveness of organizations and the U.S. workforce more broadly.

QUESTIONING CONFORMITY IN AN AGE OF INNOVATION

It surprised us that in an economic context defined by incentives to innovate, the human resource professionals that we interviewed all described essentially the same sourcing, selection, and hiring processes. Despite the unique challenges facing employers and their desire for improvements, hiring practices across a wide range of organizations are characterized by conformity rather than critical reflection or innovation. Institutional theorists have long pointed to the tendency of groups facing similar environmental conditions to grow to resemble one another over time through a variety of isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Yet, this uniformity across organizations limits the ability of human resource leaders to explore innovative, evidence-based strategies.

In particular, contemporary hiring practices largely do not take young working learners and their potential contributions to organizations into consideration. In the absence of precise competency-based criteria for hiring, human resource leaders typically defer to prior professional experiences and completed credentials when evaluating candidates. As a result, young working learners with varied resumes and longstanding engagement with education but limited “relevant” professional experience may be at a disadvantage. Further, the metrics typically used to evaluate the success of the hiring process—the duration of the search and the number of candidates generated—do not allow for the validation of selection criteria. Therefore, firms are in the dark regarding whether their selection criteria, which likely undervalue the experiences of young working learners, actually result in superior hires in the long run. As rapid change and economic uncertainty continue to characterize the learning economy, strategically engaging with young working learners offers an important direction for innovation in the hiring process and in human resource management more broadly.



SHIFTING THE PARADIGM OF EDUCATION AND WORK AS SEPARATE AND SEQUENTIAL

Secondly, our findings reveal a tension between the old paradigm of education and careers as separate and sequential and the attitudes and behaviors of young working learners. Despite the changes brought on by the learning economy, firms continue to make hiring decisions on the basis of educational attainment and to recruit from colleges and universities. This approach is consistent with the traditional view that completed educational credentials serve as the most relevant information about job candidates. For young working learners however, ongoing learning is intertwined with career development over longer periods of time. Moreover, as employers aspire to increase the level of formal education they require in hiring, working learners struggle to meet these expectations in the face of rising tuition costs, declining student aid, and the need to support themselves and their families through work while enrolled. Individuals who are able to successfully navigate these pressures likely have tremendous discipline, determination, and an ongoing commitment to education.

In the learning economy, employers who accommodate and advocate for candidates with educational training and degrees in progress may stack the deck in their own favor by developing a workforce filled with individuals who will likely continue to advance their human resources over time. Cultivating internal talent pipelines is one way to address human resource leaders' concerns over shrinking pools of talent and to give organizations a competitive advantage over other firms whose practices resist innovation. Valuing ongoing commitment to education—and not merely the completion of degrees in the hiring process—challenges the old paradigm of education and work as distinct life phases in a way that reflects current trends. Perhaps more importantly, this shift offers greater economic inclusion to young working learners whom are well positioned to make ongoing contributions to their organizations.

ACHIEVING GREATER DIVERSITY THROUGH YOUNG WORKING LEARNER INCLUSION

The third and final tension to emerge from our study concerns the role of diversity in the hiring process. Although the human resource leaders value increased diversity as a way to promote positive cultural changes within their organizations, the hiring processes they described have the potential to exclude women and ethnic minorities engaged with both learning and work. All of the interviewees we spoke with talked about the need for more ethnic and gender diversity within their organizations and for identifying wider pools of talent from which to hire. As part of the hiring practice, job openings are circulated through educational institutions and professional organizations serving underrepresented ethnic minorities and through specialized job boards like Diversityjobs.com. Yet, navigating contemporary hiring processes may disproportionately burden working learners, a group already stretched thin by balancing education, work, and often, family. To the extent that women and underrepresented minorities find themselves among those engaged with this balancing act, reducing barriers to working learners in the hiring process may be a powerful and unexplored pathway to ensuring greater diversity within organizations.

A few examples from our findings highlight how contemporary hiring processes may present particular challenges to individuals balancing work with ongoing learning. First, the number of steps in the hiring process including time- and labor-intensive assessments and application materials, as well as several rounds of interviews, may be disproportionately burdensome to young working learners with limited time and resources. Additionally, policies that reward existing employees for referring candidates during hiring may reinforce the lack of diversity in a search if current employees' social and professional networks resemble the established workforce. Finally, we argue that companies should do more than cultivate a diverse workforce through the inclusion of language in recruitment announcements and seeking to avoid bias (Gusdorf, 2008). In light of our findings, employers should direct their attention to barriers facing young working learners, an underexplored avenue toward increasing the gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity within their firms.



CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

RE-ENVISIONING HIRING PRACTICES IN THE LEARNING ECONOMY

Ultimately, hiring practices must be closely scrutinized for their role in adding to, or detracting from, institutional growth and efficiency. This work has shed important light on how these processes contribute to the realization of a learning economy, where rewarding every person for his or her knowledge, skills, and abilities cultivates greater career and life satisfaction for all. For businesses and the nation as a whole, embracing lifelong learning among employees—a commitment recognizable in today's working learners—offers the competitive advantage required by rapid change and uncertainty.

This imperative to embrace change is at odds with the tendency of professions to maintain their expert status over time through a fidelity to a set of conventional practices (Abbott, 1988). From this perspective, human resource leaders who remain immersed in the traditional tools of the trade may find it difficult to move away from the established practices that have sustained them professionally in the past. As Goethe remarked, "We only see what we know." Consequently, employers have an intrinsic trust in conventional selection and hiring processes, so much that they have often gone without challenge. Yet today, these practices fall short of mitigating the skills gaps experienced by many industries and stunt the development of a learning economy.

Many of today's sourcing, selection, and hiring processes are decades-old, with little or no ongoing empirical evidence to support their continuation. In the face of changes related to the rise of working learners, such practices can be improved by leveraging research to drive change, through empowering working learners to own their journeys as an asset, and by using these insights to address the needs of individuals and organizations alike. From this perspective, the field of human resources has an unprecedented opportunity to positively impact the cultivation of human capital within firms and also to enhance equitable access to jobs among an underserved group. We argue that these transcendent values should be at the heart of the hiring process.

Reimagining hiring practices to engage working learners and align with the learning economy is a promising opportunity for innovation. However, even significant reductions in the existing tensions between hiring and working learners that we outline in this work, will not be a cure-all. Individual working learners without adequate preparation for careers or unrealistic expectations will likely continue to struggle in the hiring process or once hired, with thriving within a firm. Nevertheless, finding innovative solutions to reducing hiring-related barriers to working learners as a group promises to facilitate career and life satisfaction for a greater number of lifelong learners and their future employers. During hiring, firms should emphasize a clear set of expectations, realistic criteria, and an assurance of ongoing support and professional learning rather than leave applicants to wade through a standardized process with limited demonstrated effectiveness.

There is undeniable value in the freedom of employers to conduct selection and hiring processes that meet their institutional needs; yet, there is also an implied responsibility to innovate hiring practices to align with the realities of the learning economy. This alignment is a crucial component to maintaining the competitiveness and innovation that our nation has come to epitomize. To paraphrase Zmuda (2010), we are concerned by the certainty with which many employers suggest what can and cannot be done to attract candidates, what the system permits and disallows, and what capabilities employees have or lack. It appears that so many leaders are resigned to the inevitability of contemporary hiring practices rather than see them for what they are, a set of habits. This tight grip on the status quo endures even as its inadequacy becomes more apparent, leaving employers and working learners alike painfully trapped between an outdated model of employment practices that no longer works and a new model that has not yet been developed. Moving forward, firms who invest their human resources in innovative hiring strategies to engage young working learners will establish themselves as leaders in the learning economy.



REFERENCES

- Abbott, A. (1988). *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- ACT Foundation. (2014). *National Learning Economy: The New American Dream*. Austin, TX: ACT Foundation. Retrieved from http://actfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/ACTF_BrochureRv3_LoRes.pdf
- Archibugi, D., & Lundvall, B. A. (2002). *The Globalizing Learning Economy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Blivin, J., & Mayo, M. (2013). *The U.S. Skills Gap: It's Not All Education's Fault, An Employer Movement is Critical*. Santa Fe, NM: Innovate+Educate. Retrieved from http://actfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Report_US-SkillsGap_Innovate-Educate.pdf
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theories and Methods*. London, UK: Pearson.
- Brown, E. J. (2015). *Shifting Workforce Development into High Gear: How Economic Developers Lead Workforce System Alignment*. Washington, DC: International Economic Development Council. Retrieved from <http://www.iedonline.org/book-store/edrp-reports/shifting-workforce-development-into-high-gear/>
- Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., Melton, M., & Price, E. W. (2015). *Learning While Earning: The New Normal*. Washington, DC: The Georgetown Center on Education and Workforce. Retrieved from <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/workinglearners/>
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- DiMaggio, P., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The Iron Cage Revisited: Collective Rationality and Institutional Isomorphism in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147–160.
- Gusdorf, M. L. (2008). *Recruitment and Selection: Hiring the Right Person*. Alexandria, VA: Society for Human Resource Management.
- Lundvall, B. A., & Johnson, B. (1994). The Learning Economy. *Journal of Industry Studies*, 1(2), 23–42.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Zmuda, A. (2010). *Breaking Free from Myths about Teaching and Learning: Innovation as an Engine for Student Success*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.



APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL^[1]

GENERAL/INTRODUCTORY

1. What is your professional background? (e.g., career path to current role, for-profit/non-profit experiences).
2. Tell me about your current role. What do you do for the organization?
3. How long have you been with the organization?
4. What brought you to the organization?
5. What was your intention when you joined?

ADOPTION

6. Tell me about the adoption of the sourcing, selection, and hiring practices at the organization.
 - a. What is the background of the current processes? How did the processes come about?
 - b. Who was instrumental in the initial decision to adopt the processes?
 - c. When did it happen?
 - d. Who uses it?

THE PROCESSES

7. Describe the sourcing, selection, and hiring processes.
 - a. What are the steps in the processes? Is a process map available?
 - b. How were the processes generated? Were these organically built, adopted from elsewhere, or adopted and customized?
 - c. Who was involved with the design of the processes and supporting tools or systems?
 - d. What tools are used? These might include job boards, assessment tools, HR systems, ATS (applicant tracking systems), or screening tools (e.g., drug testing, verification of education, background checks).
 - e. If assessments, tests, and screenings are in place, what validation methods have been used to ensure equity in use? Who do they apply to? What is done with the results? How do they impact the candidate?
 - f. How are the overall hiring process and any assessment, tools, or screenings evaluated? What are the critical metrics?
 - g. What works well and what needs to be improved regarding the processes?

HIRING CRITERIA

8. Are hiring criteria used to make employment decisions?
 - a. Why do the criteria exist?
 - b. How are the criteria established?
 - c. Who do they apply to?
 - d. Who do the criteria screen out? In?
9. What organizational obstacles or barriers exist and how they are being addressed?
 - a. What has worked well and why?
 - b. What improvements can be made? How and why?

THE ORGANIZATION

10. What role does the sourcing, selection, and hiring processes play in the organization's operation?
 - a. Are there key initiatives impacting the processes? (e.g., diversity, relocating new hires)
 - b. Are there known preferences for employment? (e.g., college degrees, locations, experiences)
11. Is there something we haven't covered on the subject of sourcing, selection, and hiring at the organization?





August 2016