Convergence, Divergence or 'A Middle Way'? The influence of Culture on Internet Recruitment.

Helen Verhoeven, Bal Chansarkar, Sue Williams

The developments in technology and economics have fuelled the debate about convergence or divergence of behaviour in organisations (Royle 1995, Shenkar and Luo 2004, Ferner et al. 2006). The two extremes in this debate are the culture-free thesis and the culture-specific thesis. The culture-free thesis suggests a convergence of managerial approaches, while the culture-specific thesis suggests that a "developing equivalence of technology in different countries does not lead to a similar convergence of managerial approaches" (Royle,1995: 52). The current paper places the convergence versus divergence debate in an Anglo-Dutch Internet recruitment context. Using Hofstede's cultural dimensions, it explores the possible differences in the practice of Internet recruitment and selection between the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. A difference in the practice of Internet recruitment would support the culture-specific thesis and so be in line with the thoughts of authors such as Hofstede (1984; 1991) and Trompenaars (1993), who suggest that theories reflect the cultural environment from which they originate, while a similarity in these practices would support the culture-free thesis. However, it could be that the practice suggests a middle way, including differences and similarities. In reflecting on the different stances in this debate, the paper lays the foundation for future empirical research.

Field of Research: HRM, Internet recruitment, culture

1. Introduction

The Internet, a relatively new phenomenon, has the potential to transform business processes, including recruitment process. Geographic borders do not restrict the Internet, and it offers a new and easy medium for communication and gives opportunities to organisations which did not arise before. Consequently, this technological development will impact upon organisations, the business environment and lead to changes in business processes. The impact of technological development and economic change on behaviour has lead to a continuing debate about convergence or divergence. Some writers argue that in line with societies, businesses will become more alike (Brewster and Tyson, 1991). This thesis, which is called the "convergence or culture free thesis" (Royle, 1995: 52), claims that "social systems will respond to common stimuli in similar ways" (Roomkin, in Brewster and Tyson, 1991: 217).

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Dr. Helen Verhoeven, Middlesex University Dubai, Email: h.verhoeven@mdx.ac
Prof.(Dr) Bal Chansarkar, Middlesex University, Email: B.Chansarkar@mdx.ac.uk
Dr. Sue Williams, Gloucestershire business School, University of Gloucestershire
Email: scwilliams@glos.ac.uk

Proponents of this thesis essentially suggest that there "are universal truths about the management of human resources" (Royle, 1995: 52) and that "cultural differences in managerial attitudes and methods will fade with time and exposure to different cultures" (Kerr et al., 1962; cited by Bournois and Metcalfe, in Brewster and Tyson, 1991:241**).** Huo et al. (2002: 42) link convergence and recruiting when they state that they "foresee an accelerated pace of global convergence in recruiting practices as a result of the advancement of contemporary information technology (e.g. Internet)". However, the convergence thesis does not go unchallenged (Brewster and Tyson, 1991). Writers such as Hofstede (1991) and Trompenaars (1993) suggest that "there are deep-rooted cultural differences between societies which are not susceptible to rapid change" (Brewster and Tyson, 1991: 4). The culture-specific thesis thus argues that economic change and technological development will not lead to a total convergence of managerial approaches. By incorporating national culture as a key variable, like much of the international business research does nowadays (Sivakuman and Nakata, 2001), Internet recruitment is placed in an interesting perspective. The introduction of the Internet into the recruitment process in both United Kingdom and the Netherlands may lead, or already has lead, to a convergence in recruitment practices. Similar findings about practices of Internet recruitment would suggest this.

2. Literature review

In order to follow the convergence versus divergence debate in the latter part of this paper, it is important to understand Hofstede's model of culture. Hofstede's model of culture (Hofstede 1980) identifies five dimensions of culture: Power Distance (PDI), Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI), Individualism and Collectivism (IDV), Masculinity and Femininity (MAS) and Long Term Orientation (LTO) and Table 1 (compiled by Verhoeven and Bennets, 2005) gives a characterisation of these variables.

Baskerville (2003: 2) finds an "overwhelming use of Culture's Consequences in two major research streams: management-related disciplines, and psychology" making it "the dominant culture paradigm" (Sivakuman and Nakata 2001: 556) and as such will be used to discuss the various stances in the debate.

Table 1: A characterisation of some cultural variables

	Opposite	Meaning
Power Distance		The extent to which everyone in a society (particularly the less powerful) accepts the unequal distribution of power.
Uncertainty avoidance		Whether people feel threatened or energised by uncertain or unknown situations.
Masculinity	Femininity	Not gender as much as role rigidity and concern with quality of life. Masculine societies expect men to be "real men" and women to be correspondingly different (tough versus tender). By contrast, feminine societies allow men to display "feminine" emotions and to take on "tender" roles, while women have greater opportunities to fill traditionally "masculine" roles.

Individualism	Collectivism	Whether society is loosely or tightly tied together.
Long Term Orientation	Short Term Orientation	Orientation towards practice and search for virtuous behaviour or orientation to belief and the search for truth

Source: after Gould et al., 2000, Evers 1999 and Aaron Marcus and Associates 2003

2.1 Convergence

Although writers such as Trompenaars (1996) and Hofstede (1984; 1991) argue that cultural differences are hard to diminish. From a practical point of view, this seems possible, as the introduction of information technology can ease and add speed to the communication between different departments and/or subsidiaries. It therefore, has the ability to aid centralisation and standardisation of the process. This might lead to converge of the business practice.

Furthermore, the introduction of information technology provides extra possibilities for organisations to use the same set of tools during the recruitment process. Whereas small organisations could not perform certain operations due to a lack of resources, the introduction of information technology seems to remove some of these constraints and thus gives more opportunities for equal practices. These equal practices can expand from organisational level to international level.

Besides these practical arguments, support for the convergence theory can also be found in, and developed from, existing theories. In this respect, it is interesting to follow and build further on the line of thinking put forward by Johnston and Johal (1999), especially as their work is directly related to the use of the Internet. Coming from a marketing stance, they described the meanings of Hofstede's four cultural variables, and identified the demographics and psychographics associated with the users of the Internet. They then mapped the virtual cultural entity amidst the 40 countries used in Hofstede's four variables rather than the fifth, LTO.

Table 2 shows both Hofstede's scores for the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (1984; 1991) and the position of the Internet as mapped by Johnston and Johal (1999).

TABLE 2: Hofstede's model and the Internet

Index Country	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI	LTO
Netherlands	38	80	14	53	44
United Kingdom	35	89	66	35	25
Internet	Low	Collectivist becoming mixed	Feminine becoming mixed	Low	

Source: adapted from Hofstede (1984; 1991) and Johnston and Johal (1999)

As visible in Table 2, the "Internet as culture group" has a different positioning in comparison with both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Where the UK and the Netherlands are rather individualistic (IDV), the Internet culture can be typified as

collectivist. On the UAI dimension the Internet group scores 'feminine becoming mixed', whereas the Netherlands score feminine and the UK masculine. The low score of the Internet on the UAI is in line with the UK score but not with the Netherlands, which score higher on uncertainty avoidance. Only the PDI score is in line with the scores of both countries. Therefore, a possible transfer from this theory out of the marketing domain into the IR practice will significantly impact on the way in which cultural differences are perceived to influence the Internet recruitment practice.

The acceptance of the Johnson and Johal thesis suggests that possible differences in practices and perceptions of Internet recruitment cannot be allocated to differences in national or organisational culture, as the Internet represents a culture group which exceeds national and organisational boundaries.

It can be further argued that the existence of this Internet culture ensures that there will be no significant differences in the practice and perceptions of Internet recruitment in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Consequently, the Johnson and Johal thesis (1999) can underpin the convergence theory.

In order to assess the validity of the transfer of the Johnson and Johal thesis into the HR field, one needs to return to the actual starting position of this theory. The original theory stems from the marketing field where it is, amongst others, used to describe and typify possible customers groups. Therefore, marketeers can use the theory to guide and streamline their marketing activities.

The usage of theory seems similar in the HR field, in the sense that HR professionals can use the knowledge gained from this theory to streamline their recruitment and selection activities as the theory indicates the way to set up and direct activities to best reach their target group. However, such a transfer that HR professionals are a part of the Internet culture group, and as such seem to have a more participating role than the marketeers in their field. Therefore, it might be contentious to compare the group of HR professionals with the group of marketing professionals. This would negatively influence the transfer of the theory.

Furthermore, the transfer of the theory assumes similarity in the way employers and applicants use the Internet. It thus assumes that that employers use the Internet in exactly the same way to find applicants as jobseekers who are searching for a job. However, this is debatable. Even if the practices are similar, it is possible that this is due to circumstances such as technological limitations, rather than stemming from a similarity of norms and values. It is thus similar in Hofstede's (1984; 1991) different dimensions. This would again negatively influence the transfer of the theory.

Thus the support for the convergence thesis seems to be based on two assumptions. Firstly, jobseekers and employers use the Internet in the same manner. Secondly, both jobseekers and employers are a part of an Internet culture which has its own norms and values rather than jobseekers and employers being a part of their national cultures and being subjected to national norms and values.

In support the convergence thesis it could be argued that the technology adoption curve applies to both the groups and that both the groups show the same characteristics. Like any other process and product, internet recruitment has a

lifecycle and will go through the different stages of - the introduction, growth, maturity and decline stage. Internet recruitment is supposed to be in its start/growth phase (E-recruiting and staffing conference, 2001), which implies in both the groups majority using the tool will be innovators, early adopters and early majority. As such, the groups using the tool will have the same characteristics.

Further support can be gained by illuminating research in the area of 'Internet culture'. In this respect, the work of Kumar Das (1999: 1) is interesting as he argues that "the Net can be viewed as a pan-societal superstructure which supports its own distinct culture". In the light of the convergence-divergence debate, the existence of such distinct culture would imply that all users, thus employers and jobseekers alike, share the same norms and values, hence leading to uniform practices and perceptions.

Ess (2002: online) argues that "there remains an intractable, culturally-shaped connection between individuals in local communities and any "virtual communities" emerging in cyberspace" and goes on to state that cultural values will not entirely transcend existent cultures. This suggests that different virtual community cultures will exist and that it cannot be argued that one single ' Internet culture' has developed which is free of national cultural influences. The first suggestion can be compared with the existence of subcultures within a national or with an organisational culture, which is deviated from the national culture. The second suggestion, though, leads to believe that it might be too contentious to assume that there is a possibility of one single Internet culture, in which members have the same norms and values despite their different cultural backgrounds. Consequently, it will be difficult to argue that the 'internet culture' can be placed beside the cultures of different countries on Hofstede's different dimensions.

The acceptance of the Johnson and Johal thesis and other theories that argue that the Internet has its own culture implies few to no differences in the practice and perceptions of Internet recruitment between the Netherlands and the United Kingdom and thus leading to convergence of the practice.

2.2 Divergence

The acceptance of the Hofstede thesis (1984; 1991) suggests that there will be differences between the Internet practice in UK and the Netherlands. Based on the differences on the cultural dimensions (and the countries' culture in general shown in Table 1) one could argue that the following practices differ in Internet Recruitment as described below.

Total process: Employers in the Netherlands might be more reluctant in using Internet recruitment than employers in UK due to the higher UAI. Furthermore, due to geographic position and history, it is expected that, in comparison with UK, more employers in the Netherlands provide homepages in a different language than the country's mother tongue and that Dutch language websites are shorter than the UK websites.

Manpower/ Human resource planning: Culture can influence promotion patterns and turnover rates. It is expected that promotion in UK, more than in the Netherlands, is based on market value and takes place from inside and outside. However, as different parts of culture theory contradict each other, it can not be predicted which country has the highest labour turnover rate.

Recruitment decision: Differences in national legislation can be a detriment in taking the recruitment decision.

Job description/person specification: Both content and style of writing are subject to cultural influences. Specifications in both the Netherlands and UK are expected to focus on individualistic characteristics (IDV). Furthermore, it is expected that specifications in the Netherlands will draw the attention to 'soft' characteristics, while specifications in UK will draw the attention to 'masculine' characteristics (high MAS).

Establishing conditions: Culture theories applicable in this area contradict each other. Trompenaars' specific versus diffuse strategies dilemma suggests that conditions on offer in the Netherlands and UK will be similar and focus on primary working conditions such as salary. Hofstede's MAS-score, however, suggests that UK employees will attach greater importance to 'material success' than their Dutch counterparts. Furthermore, the Netherlands ascribe status whereas UK is more achievement-based. It is expected that this difference is traceable in the conditions on offer.

Design of recruitment activities:

Target group and location:
On the basis of the MAS-score, it is expected that, in comparison with UK, there will be more women in more highly qualified and better paid jobs in the Netherlands. These women are not expected to be particularly assertive in comparison with the women in UK where qualified jobs for woman are linked with assertiveness. Furthermore, it is expected that both UK and the Netherlands will show a low level of nepotism.

Recruitment channels and channel decisions:
It is expected that applicants in both countries use a research base in the job-searching process. The use of different tools by both applicants and jobseekers is highly likely. Economic, demographic, geographic, technologic and ecological factors can influence channel decisions.

Recruitment message:
Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance index implies that the Dutch recruitment messages should provide more reassuring information in comparison with UK recruitment messages. The UK recruitment messages are assumed to have a more masculine character, to be slightly more neutral, more direct and to the point in comparison with the Dutch recruitment messages. Furthermore, UK recruitment messages might reflect the slight difference on the individualism versus collectivism scale, by giving more attention to less individualistic elements.

Recruitment activities: It is expected that recruitment activities and pool management in UK have a more neutral and direct character in comparison with the Netherlands. It might therefore be seem that these activities are more formal in the Netherlands, with shorter and more direct messages towards the jobseekers.

Selection: The higher uncertainty avoidance level of the Netherlands may lead to different patterns in the use of selection tools. In order to reduce uncertainty, organisations might use more tools or tools with a higher predictability level in their selection process. The difference in MAS-score implies differences in expectations towards jobseekers and differences in the way applicants will present themselves. The UK jobseekers are expected to be more assertive and less modest and tender in comparison with their Dutch counterparts. Employers in UK and the Netherlands are supposed to be searching for different characteristics in applicants and thus for different keywords in applications. Furthermore, they will give different levels of attention to elements such as punctuality and promptness.

Evaluation: The long-term perspective of the Netherlands and its medium score on the uncertainty avoidance index make it likely that organisations in the Netherlands evaluate the recruitment process more in comparison with organisations in UK.

The acceptance of the Hofstede thesis (1984; 1991), and thus the convergence stance in the debate suggests that these differences, between the Internet practice in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands will exist. However, empirical research is needed to verify the actual practices of the two countries.

2.3 The middle way

It is possible to go beyond those two extreme positions by reflecting on a research carried out by Bloom et al. (1994). Their research has led to the development of a European management model. On the one hand, the model acknowledges diversity and so supports the 'culture-specific thesis', while the identification of common characteristics supports the 'culture-free thesis'. Therefore, it does not fit any of the two extremes totally.

The European management model proposed by Bloom et al. (1994) shows that there is a remarkable similarity in viewpoints, attitudes and approaches throughout European business world. The four basic characteristics of this model comprise the way in which international diversity is managed, the social responsibility felt by European companies, the role of internal negotiation and the orientation towards people. Other characteristics identified by Bloom et al. (1994) are the existence of less formal management systems and a product orientation. Although these two characteristics are found frequently, they are not found under all circumstances.

For a number of reasons the European management model, when used in a recruitment context, seems usable only as a framework. First, the model reviews the similarities in the management area as a whole, and not for recruitment in particular. This means that the findings need to be translated specifically to this practice with checks for reliability.

For example, Bloom et al. found that Europeans believe that "people are served by progress" (Bloom et al., 1994: 19) and that organisations "opt for long-term thinking on strategic decisions and investments" (Bloom et al., 1994: 18). These findings need to be assessed for their consequences for the Internet recruitment practice.

Secondly, the inconsistent pattern found by Bloom et al. (1994) implies that the model is not applicable in every situation. So, even though the model gives the general tendency and not all embracing as it cannot be used to make generalisations.

Thirdly, the model fails to reflect in detail the similarities that appear between the viewpoints, attitudes and approaches. Even though similarities may exist, it is the extent to which they exist which is important for the present study. For example, the European management model suggests that "Europeans understand diversity, respect it and like it" (Bloom et al., 1994: 18). It is, however, unclear how this specifically influences the Internet recruitment practice. One way of respecting and liking diversity could be an active approach to recruit outside national borders but there are different ways to apply these findings to Internet recruitment.

Even though the European management model can, for the reasons described above, only provide indications into expected practices and perceptions of Internet recruitment in both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, its existence is important, as it seems to represent a third or 'middle stance' in the convergence-divergence debate.

It can be argued that the European Internet recruitment practice might progress in a similar way: evolving common characteristics but still maintaining some diversity. Practices and perceptions of Internet recruitment would in this situation become more standardised, but on a practical level the practices will be slightly adjusted to fit the national and organisational culture. This situation can be compared with the existence of European law, which sets the framework but leaves it up to member countries to work within this framework.

3. Conclusion

The former discussions mainly focused on the different stances in the convergence versus divergence debate. Theory put forward by Johnson and Johal (1999) was used to underpin the convergence argument, while Hofstede's theory to discuss the divergence stance. However, it is advocated that the differences between the Internet recruitment practice in UK and the Netherlands needs to be verified by empirical research. It could be that the outcome of such research supports the 'middle way' in the debate rather than establishing support for one of the two extremes (convergence versus divergence). One can therefore only agree with Robbins and Stylianou (2001-2002; 7), who suggest that "As the use of the Internet grows around the world, its impact on cultural convergence deserves additional study."

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