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Intuiting the Selection Context

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Highhouse (2008) would prefer that decision-making authorities rely on our expert systems rather than persistently relying on "intuition" in high-stakes settings. He argues that implicit beliefs from popular culture pervade managerial decision making and should be corrected by educating decision makers about the role of probability and error in judgment. The assumption here is that if we know about the tendencies that induce poor personnel selection decisions, we will conform more to experts' standards.

In this commentary, we will argue that although Highhouse may be correct in identifying an individual tendency to favor subjectivity, he incorrectly "intuits" the problem and the subsequent solutions to selection decision shortcomings. Specifically, we suggest that he has not been doing enough to try to understand the needs of the decision maker, which are often a function of context. As a result, he characterizes the observed phenomenon at the incorrect level of analysis, without reference to this context. Simply stated, although the scientist–practitioner may seek to promote valid and empirically grounded employment decisions, what the decision maker wants most is to hire a suitable person in a timely and efficient manner and with a minimum of "fuss."

As a case in point, Austin, Klimoski, and Hunt (1996) report on a project conducted on behalf of a state government agency. This involved the design and implementation of a simulation-based selection program for agency investigators. In this case, evidence of (content) validity was not enough to sustain the program once the consultants completed their phase of the effort. In spite of strong client involvement and public statements of commitment from stakeholders (e.g., union, managers, human resources [HR]), the screening protocol fell into disuse. As a state agency, sustaining the program in the face of a change of administration created challenges. So did the complexities of the simulation itself. Austin et al. argue that in modeling the actual drivers of selection systems in use, we should not only give weight to technical quality (e.g., reliability, validity) but must also include issues of practicality and political realities as factors. To put it another way, the use of intuition in personnel decision making may occur as a result of a consideration of the *liabilities* of scientifically derived methods as much as from a belief in the *benefits* that are thought to be derived. Similar points have been made by Johns (1993).

Employee Selection As a Collective Process

As usually acknowledged (but often not stressed) in our textbooks, the funding, design, implementation, and institutionalization

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of a personnel selection platform is a complex process (Muchinsky, 2004). It takes alignment of many stakeholders in the company for any selection program to get going. Similarly, once in play, it is usually necessary that a subset of individuals or business units combine efforts to use and maintain a personnel selection platform. Even at the individual decision-making level of analysis, from narrowing a pool of candidates to making a final offer, collectives are typically involved. It is rare that a high-stakes hiring decision is made by someone without being accountable to others.

For example, as we write this piece, we are actively recruiting new faculty members for our schools. We are following a well-developed protocol (e.g., position description, public postings, seeking multiple sources of data to screen for finalists), consistent with professional practice. In like manner, we are involving numerous faculty, staff, and administrators in a variety of opportunities (lunch, job talk, group interviews, and one-on-one interviews). This is done partly to engage and evaluate each finalist but also to engage and integrate important organizational stakeholders (including candidates) into the final decision (Gilliland & Cherry, 2000). After seeing up to three candidates, a search committee offers a recommendation to the department chair, and the preferences of both the committee and the chair are forwarded to the dean. The dean has the opportunity to consult with any and all stakeholders to make a decision. Although the dean has controlling authority, numerous people will be looking to him/her for an explanation for any decision that does go contrary to faculty committee recommendations.

When Highhouse's examples are compared with this one, he appears to describe employment decisions made without reference to context. What he describes is our individual human tendency to be unduly influenced by implicit beliefs or intuition, where we are not constrained by HR protocols or by workplace accountabilities (Frink & Klimoski, 1998). What we illustrate here is that context matters. Instead of framing the problem as a property of an individual, Highhouse would be on stronger ground if he treated symptoms of haphazard, unscientific, more intuitively based employment decision making as a property of a work team, business unit, or firm (Jones, Stevens, & Fischer, 2000; Klimoski & Jones, 1995). In other words, if individuals are "intuitive" in making high-stakes decisions, it may be that the situation should be examined more thoroughly.

Going a step further, individual decisions that appear to be intuitive may actually be based on a manager's careful consideration of context (Kozlowski, Chao, & Morrison, 1998). In this case, what is lacking is *our research* into factors in the organizational context that influence management decisions. If this is the case, managerial decisions may be quite adaptive, even though they do not conform to our narrow definition of "the problem." Ironically, Highhouse's own attempt (Highhouse & Harris, 1993) to apply template matching to the definition of situational characteristics might prove profitable in attempting to understand ways that context is integrated into managerial decisions.

The Better to Remediate

Reframing the problem at the system level would seem to be useful for both better defining the root causes and, importantly, guiding interventions. Even if intuitive assessment is what is replacing our empirical evidence, one might look into such things as the way that the local incentive structure is operating in a company. For example, the time value of money might be seen as prompting a "good enough" solution to hiring someone. Though investment in industrial and organizational techniques as surrogate "expertise" might improve decision accuracy for a few cases, this could be outweighed by other expenses to the individual or the firm. Alternatively, one might look at realistic accountabilities (Frink & Klimoski, 1998; Kozlowski et al., 1998; Martin, Callen, Johnson, & Parboteeah, 2007) in a formal needs assessment prior to implementing a technically sound selection protocol. For example, an individual

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decision maker may rely on a very knowledgeable assessment of the needs, expectations, or habits of his or her supervisor—not an intuitive decision but one that could be uncovered in the development of a "selection solution."

Certainly, applying the same sort of needs assessment to selection system development that is considered appropriate for other HR system development would tend to identify and possibly mitigate the effects of contextual factors in the implementation of such a system. Such a multilevel approach to both diagnosis and interventions (Hitt, Beamish, Jackson, & Mathieu, 2007) would tend to promote evidence-based employee decision-making practices (Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007) and allow for better, more focused, and impactful interventions. Knowledge of the interpersonal, social, and political forces operating in decision making might be a more promising approach to reducing reliance on intuition. By operating on the system level, with multiple stakeholders' involvement, there is the possibility of crafting successful longer term solutions as well. Once in place, a change in a property of the system (e.g., a requirement for better documentation) might lower the probability of managers invoking intuition in future decisions.

These solutions contrast dramatically with Highhouse's. He believes that supplying information to decision makers about their implicit (false) beliefs will effectively change their expectations about personnel selection. Based on our reframing, whereby the symptoms he describes are seen as a reflection of a *systems* problem (challenge), we suggest that solutions would have to be derived from an analysis of context. In this regard, Highhouse's approach runs contrary to what we should have learned over the years about shaping behavior in the workplace. That is, there is indeed "folly in expecting A" (better organizational decisions) "while rewarding B" (better individual decisions; Kerr, 1975).

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