



LUND UNIVERSITY  
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# *“Reading between the lines”*

*A case study on the perception and handling of distortion  
caused by biases in employment interviews.*

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# Abstract

**Aim:** The aim of this thesis is to explore and understand how professional recruiters perceive and handle distortion caused by biases in employment interviews, and thereby to contribute towards literature in the fields of Recruitment and Selection and Human Resource Management.

**Methodology:** This thesis concerns an abductive study in which we conduct qualitative research by utilizing a holistic single case study design. The empirical basis for this research was a case study at a globally recognized recruitment firm, in which we conducted twelve semi structured interviews with a diverse sample of professional recruiters.

**Keywords:** Recruitment, Employment Interview, Biases, Distortion, Knowledge, Knowledge Management, Innovation.

**Theoretical Fields:** This study primarily contributes to the research fields of Recruitment and Selection and Human Resources Management. Moreover, this study also provides insights for fields such as Personnel Management, Organizational Behavior and Managerial Psychology.

**Conclusion:** We found that recruiters are overconfident in their ability to perceive distortion yet lack the self awareness to realize that they inflict distortion themselves. We also found that there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution to handling distortion caused by biases, there are however some prerequisites to improve the handling of distortion caused by biases in interviews, both in character traits of the recruiter as well as in interview design.

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# 1 Introduction

The Recruitment and Selection field has gained considerable popularity over the last years as it is no secret that the successful selection of human capital is of paramount importance towards the prosperity of any organization (Law, Bourdage & O'Neill, 2016). The selection of human capital is based heavily on many elements including the employment interview, which is arguably the most important element of all; an employment interview is mostly conducted by hiring managers and professional recruiters whose task it is to learn and understand the candidate to the fullest extent possible. More explicitly, professional recruiters' main task is to harvest a thorough understanding of the future employer's culture and strategy along with the ideal candidate's profile in order to produce an ideal match (Mileham, 2000). Hence, it is of crucial importance that professional recruiters gain an accurate understanding of the candidate to match them with the right job, this is done in different manners; yet some authors claim that the most important one is the face to face employment interview (Cable, 2013).

*"Recruiting is hard. It's just finding the needles in the haystack. You can't know enough in a one-hour interview. So, in the end, it's ultimately based on your gut. How do I feel about this person? What are they like when they're challenged? I ask everybody that: "Why are you here?" The answers themselves are not what you're looking for. It's the meta-data."*

Steve Jobs, *Apple* (cited in Byrne, 2011, p.79)

Mileham, (2000, p.161) further explains that "a professional recruiter is sensitive to requirements of both the client and the candidate to the right job, to the benefit of all concerned". Other authors similarly argue that the recruiting processes yield high quality employees through good selection methods which require a good understanding of the candidate (Heraty & Morley, 1998; Murphy & Shiarella, 1997). It is also key to recognize that professional recruiters predominantly focus on the assessment and selection of highly skilled

knowledge workers, as nowadays being able to recruit these type of employees is a critical success factor to gain competitive advantage in the market (Berthon, Ewing & Hah, 2005; Sutherland, Torricelli & Karg, 2002; Alvesson, 2004). Similarly, it is accepted that fruitful hiring potentially yields corporate increases in revenue and market share, increased productivity and a pleasant work climate (Weiss & Feldman, 2006). Other authors argue that an organization's success is closely tied to the type of individuals it employs (Dineen & Soltis, 2011; Wilden, Gudergan & Lings, 2010). In unison with previous authors, it is argued that inadequate recruitment and selection of human capital can have detrimental consequences; Jupe, Vrij, Nahari, Leal and Mann (2016) strongly argue that the employment of individuals without the necessary skills or qualifications is counterproductive to any company and their respective industry. Needless to say, the proper selection of candidates with the most suitable qualifications allows organizations to save time, effort and money; as a consequence, managers are concerned and motivated to know whether applicants are truly competent or they simply use deception techniques to appear to be the best fit for the job (Roulin, 2016).

*“The key for us, number one, has always been hiring very smart people.”*

Bill Gates, *Microsoft* (cited in Holtsnider & Jaffe, 2012, p.65)

As expressed by scholars and leading business figures alike, being able to decipher and recognize the candidate's skills, true character and overall profile is of immense importance, as assessing and understanding the candidate is the very first step towards recognizing whether the candidate is the best fit for the future employer. Thus, it is pivotal that professional recruiters excel at gaining a thorough and accurate understanding of the candidate in the employment interview (Macan, 2009), thus we investigate this area further. Macan (2009, p.13) explains that the employment interview “is a social interaction where the interviewer and applicant exchange and process the information gathered from each other”. It is also explained that in an employment interview, both parties put faith in the notion that the exchanged content is honest, pure and accurate (Klotz, Motta Veiga, Buckley & Gavin, 2003).

Simply put, the employment interview is the time in which the recruiter attempts to absorb as much information from the candidate as possible.

Considering all the presented arguments, it is gathered that the employment interview is of vital importance for an organization, thus we take interest in exploring this further in a more empirical and pragmatic manner; this exploration and its findings are presented following.

## 1.1 Pragmatic Exploration of the Employment Interview

In this section, we exclusively discuss the findings collected in a preliminary interview with an executive manager with over six years of experience as a professional recruiter at a globally recognized professional recruitment firm, hereafter referred to as ‘Interviewee A’. The goal of this interview was to collect valuable insight from the recruiter in order to obtain better exposure to topics revolving the employment interview that are contemporary and of high interest. This interview proved to be fruitful as the interviewed recruiter led us towards two topics within the organization that receive much attention.

The first and most interesting finding explained by Interviewee A revolves around how much time and effort professional recruiters need to invest in order to filter out biases to receive genuine information to subsequently discover the real profiles and real motivations of candidates. Interviewee A elaborates and states that *“not all candidates are open and honest, sometimes candidates do not even notice they are lying and this affects the quality of the interview tremendously”*. Interviewee A also notices that sometimes candidates try to present themselves in such a way that they come across more attractive towards the employer. *“They try to present themselves greatly... they try to convey that they can do everything and nothing is a problem”* (Interviewee A). Whereas in the former quote Interviewee A speaks about how candidates try to increase their negotiation power, in the latter quote he talks about an older candidate that was willing to say everything in order to land a second interview. He further elaborates this topic by stating that *“[...] you even feel that there is something different with*

*some candidates, because it's like a study you are going through all year. [...] I ask the same questions most of the times, and if someone answers differently you notice it immediately and then you should dig deeper, and ask direct questions.” (Interviewee A)*

Another interesting finding that contradicted our expectations is that a lot of the behaviours to handle the distortion caused by biases in the interview are mainly tacit; Interviewee A explains that he does not always try to rationalize his methods, he furthermore explains that behaviours based on gut feeling are accepted and somewhat encouraged at the firm as long as the recruiter meets her or his targets. According to Interviewee A the possession of this gut feeling is exactly what divides ‘good recruiters’ from ‘great recruiters’. On the other hand, he also acknowledges that this tacit knowledge complicates this recruitment firm’s training effort to develop ‘great recruiters’; however, this firm strives to capture and exploit this tacit knowledge for its success.

*“It's very hard, to teach someone if two people match. I think it's very hard, because it's a lot of gut feeling, years of experience and your own character.”*

(Interviewee A)

In sum, as these foundational findings are based on only one interviewee, we abstain from presenting the answers of Interviewee A as the truth, instead we use these findings to funnel our avenues of study. The most interesting finding from this first interview is the distortion caused by biases in employment interviews. Even though Interviewee A does not mention the term ‘biases’ and we were not familiar with the phenomenon beforehand, the analysis of this preliminary interview has proved valuable in spotting this phenomenon as Interviewee A actually gave us multiple examples of distortion caused by biases in employment interviews. A final interesting finding is that a substantial amount of behaviours and practices towards perceiving and handling the distortion caused by biases is tacit.

## 1.2 Problem Discussion

While observing relevant phenomena related to our study along the results of our first interview, we learned that the distortion caused by biases in employment interviews is a widely recognized and thought-provoking phenomenon, yet it is poorly studied. Along the same lines, extensive research conducted by Roulin (2016) poses that up to 97 percent of job applicants use at least one impression management tactic to promote themselves, averaging 37 of such tactics used per interview. Similarly, a study conducted by Weiss and Feldman (2006) shows that 90 percent of interviewees admitted to have lied in the employment interview. Hence, it is undeniable that the results of employment interviews are highly distorted by deception and biases.

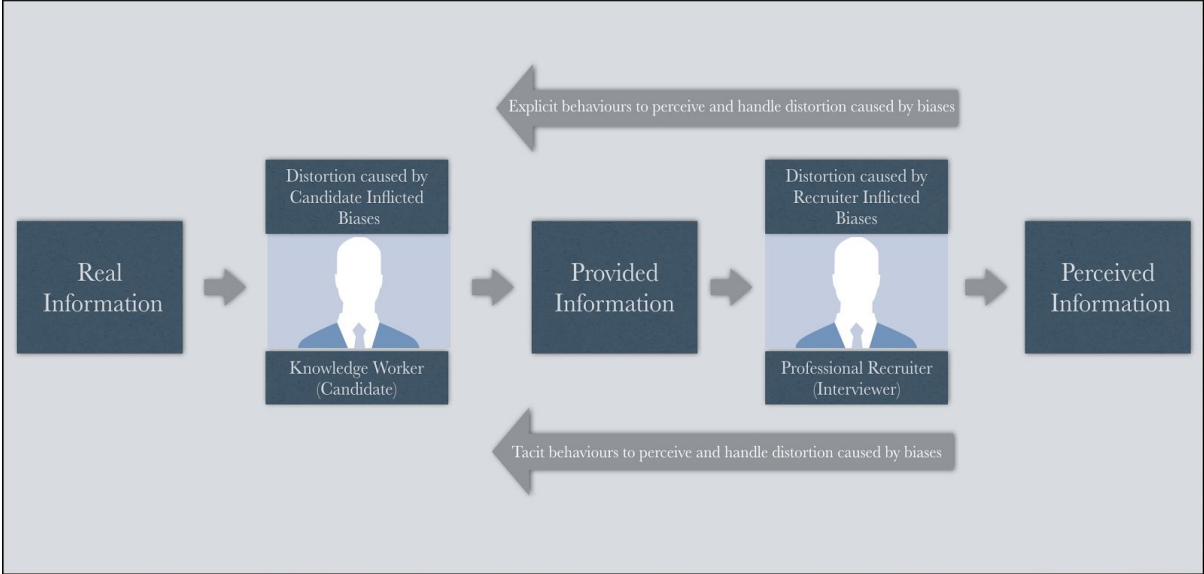
Consequently, the understanding and handling of distortion caused by biases in employment interviews is an area of study that is in dire need of further research. Additionally, many leading authors in the recruitment and selection field have identified the need for more research. For instance, Macan (2009, p.13) states that “countless opportunities exist to advance our understanding of employment interviews both theoretically and practically”. Miles and Sadler-Smith (2014) and Breugh (2013) state that the findings of topics such as selective exposure, confirmation bias and other types of bias apply to many recruitment subjects and it should definitely be considered in the design of future studies. Roulin, Bangerter and Levashina (2014, pp.3-4) argue that “research has neglected to simultaneously examine applicants' use of honest and deceptive tactics in real employment interviews” and that “interviewers want to know the truth about applicants' qualities, yet research on this issue is still limited”. More emphatically; Ryan and Ployhart (2014, p.698) state that “for many years, research on cognitive ability has been almost devoid in the employee selection area”. Thus, further research regarding the handling of biases in the ‘recruitment and selection’ area is necessary. Consequently, we narrow our focus around the perception and handling of distortion caused by biases in the employment interview.

There are many elements to observe regarding biases in the employment interview; to exemplify, authors such as Bertrand and Mullainathan (2001, p.2) elaborate on “how cognitive factors affect the way people answer questions”, these authors explain that people are prompt to provide answers consistent with questions they have previously asked, some questions may trigger certain memories and attitudes, the wording of a question, even the sequence of words in a question will predispose the candidate when being interviewed. In parallel, an eminent type of bias in interviews is ‘social desirability’, which occurs when “respondents want to avoid looking bad in front of an interviewer” (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2001, p.3), or desire to gain social approval by responding in certain ways which neglect to reflect their true self (Huang, Liao & Chang, 1998; King & Bruner, 2000). Similarly, other authors recognize that “applicants often use impression management in employment interviews, and such tactics can considerably influence interviewers’ evaluations” (Roulin, Bangerter & Levashina, 2014, p.143). More interestingly, the quality of an employment interview is not only distorted by candidate inflicted biases, it is also distorted by biases inflicted by the recruiter. For instance, the recruiters are recognized to occasionally hold ‘prejudice’ towards certain characteristics of the candidate, such as gender, race or nationality (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2001; Macan, 2009). Along the same lines, nonverbal behaviours such as smiling, eye contact, the forward lean and body orientation by the applicant can affect recruiter’s ratings (Macan, 2009). Recruiters have also been identified to be influenced by other phenomena such as the ‘overconfidence effect’, ‘halo effect’ and ‘anchoring bias’, which all malform the purity of the employment interview results and thus leading to mediocre hires.

It is furthermore inevitable to notice the presence of tacitness in the behaviours pertaining to the recruitment profession. This goes along with theory by Alvesson (2004, p1) who states that these type of jobs which are not highly routinized “call for some degree of creativity and adaptation to specific circumstances”, Alvesson, (2004, p14) further argues that “knowledge is best used to refer to cognitive issues that are fairly complex, and often slippery and ambiguous, as is its role in what is constructed as knowledge work and the evaluation of work

outcomes”, this mirrors the construct of the recruitment professionals and the complexity of perceiving and handling distortion caused by biases in employment interviews.

We have included the following illustration to shape a clear image of how biases distort the employment interview. On the left, we start with the real information that refers to accurate answers, this information is first distorted by candidate inflicted biases that forms the provided information. This information is the actual answer given by the candidate, the answer is, on its turn, distorted by recruiter inflicted biases to shape the perceived information. Moreover, this image displays that the recruiter places efforts towards perceiving and handling the distortion caused by biases, both in tacit and explicit ways, in order to obtain as much real information as possible.



We have elaborated only on a few ways of how employment interviews are largely distorted by biases inflicted by both the recruiter and the candidate. Nonetheless, there are various other kinds of biases, which all lead to the same: an inaccurate read of the candidate. We have also highlighted that the perception and handling distortion caused by biases is to a certain extent tacit and individual. Thus, it is interesting and necessary to further investigate the distortion

caused by biases in the employment interview, as this distortion unavoidably affects the quality of human capital being selected.

Similarly, we recognize that the Recruitment and Selection and Human Resource Management fields lack contemporary studies revolving two areas: qualitative research of the perception and handling of biases in employment interviews as well as the understanding of knowledge management efforts revolving behaviours to handle the distortion created by biases. Both of these areas have been poorly studied overall. We also notice that current literature focuses and covers the topics of handling distortion and biases predominantly in surveys or written assessments; hence, the scarce literature that exists on these topics is quantitative.

We moreover argue that the perspective of professional recruiters from a well established recruitment firm is a very valuable source of information for this study. The reason for this is founded in the relationship and communication between a third party professional recruiter and candidates, which is candid, less tense and more open compared to a direct relationship between potential employers and candidates, in which the anxiety levels are higher given the stakes of obtaining a job (Klotz et al. 2013; Muduli & Trivedi, 2015). It is also recognized that professional recruiters are able to substantially improve the quality of the employment interview as they are skilled and trained to decipher the candidate's profile by using techniques and practices that are proven to be efficient (Cable, 2013). Some of the professional recruiters we interview declare to conduct anywhere between 40 and 50 interviews per month; these professional recruiters only focus on recruiting and selecting human talent, it is their profession and livelihood. Moreover, the profitability and reputation of recruitment firms is solely based on successful allocation of human capital in different organizations, thus recruitment firms go to great lengths to train and foster successful professional recruiters. Hence, professional recruiters are a unique and rich source of information as they are more exposed and experienced in recruitment and selection than regular hiring managers or other sources.



### 1.3 Aim and Research Question

We aim to explore and understand how professional recruiters perceive and handle the distortion caused by biases in employment interviews, and we thereby contribute towards literature in the fields of Recruitment and Selection and Human Resource Management. Our purpose is founded in the overwhelming explicit demand for contemporary knowledge in the field of Recruitment and Selection. Worldly known scholars are vehement when raising awareness of the dire need for more exploration of the Recruitment and Selection field. Hence, we answer that call and progress the exploration and understanding of the employment interview, which is a critical element of the selection process. Lastly, we strive to create valuable knowledge that can be utilized by hiring managers, professional recruiters and anyone interested in learning how to maximize the results of employment interviews. Consequently, we explore and answer the following research question:

*How do professional recruiters perceive and handle the distortion caused by biases in employment interviews?*

One of the findings from our foundational interview poses that properly handling the distortion caused by biases requires a substantial amount of tacit knowledge and competence. Hence, we strive to explore the extent of tacit behaviours that take place in employment interviews through the lens of knowledge management; we furthermore observe management efforts to capture and distribute this tacit knowledge across the organization.



## 2 Methodology

In this chapter the methodological framework is laid out. Both research approach and research method are explained, after which the case study is presented in further detail. Finally, we discuss the data collection, empirical data analysis, reflexivity and the quality of the research.

### 2.1 Research Approach

In our research we apply the abductive approach, which is a combination of both the deductive and the inductive approach, the abductive approach allows for a deeper understanding as the empirical data is less influenced by the theoretical framework and preconceptions and vice versa (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). Furthermore, the abductive approach allows us to move between theory and empirical data and enables us to improve both the empirical data and the theoretical framework continuously during our research which assures that the two chapters will sustain and complement each other.

In order to understand the whole process of how professional recruiters perceive and handle distortion caused by biases, we have to grasp the meaning of the individual parts that make up the process, however “the meaning of a part can only be understood if it is related to the whole” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p.92). This makes for a circle of continuity between the whole and its parts; this phenomenon is called ‘hermeneutics’ (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). This applies to our case; thus we utilize this hermeneutical circle in order to deepen the research.

## 2.2 Research Method

We utilize qualitative research in the form of semi structured interviews, using the first interview to explore interesting topics and refine our scope (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009; Merriam, 2009). By selecting this method, we allow ourselves to pick up on nonverbal communication and enable ourselves to tackle ambiguous answers by asking follow-up questions. The use of semi structured interviews allows us to cover the points we intend to investigate while still remaining agile and able to diverge from the scheduled prompt (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The chosen research approach therefore gives us the freedom to discover and explore causal relationships and to find interesting aspects that we did not anticipate for when writing up the question prompt; especially for the preliminary interview this helps us to further refine the scope of our research.

Yin (2009) identifies five different methods of research, which are: experiment, survey, archival analysis, history and case study. Following Yin's (2009) selection requirements we choose the case study as our research method of choice since the research we aim to conduct involves a 'how' question. Additionally, our research does not require the control of behavioral events and ultimately our research focuses on a contemporary concept. Case studies can be divided with the use of two variables; single-case as opposed to multiple-case design, and holistic versus embedded (Yin, 2009). On the axis of single-case to multiple-case design we opt for a single-case design. In this research, we argue for using a single-case design because our chosen research company provides us with a representative case of the recruitment consulting industry and we want to explore how the recruiters at this company perceive and handle the presence of distortion caused by biases in everyday circumstances in the industry. As for the second variable, we utilize a holistic design, given that our case company we disregard looking into further subunits whereas we entirely focus ourselves on the professional recruiters. We believe that this holistic design will facilitate for more valuable and deep knowledge while still including different aspects as we interview

employees of our case company with varying experience, age, gender, and hierarchical position.

## 2.3 Case Study and Selection

The sole case study in this thesis is Michael Page, an operational brand of the global recruitment firm PageGroup. PageGroup was founded in 197, has expanded to 35 countries and employs almost 6000 employees of whom the large majority are professional recruiters (PageGroup, n.d.). We got in contact with Michael Page via our personal network and thus use convenience sampling in our choice of research company (Yin, 2014).

It is important to realize that there are many different ways to outsource recruitment. For instance, recruitment firms such as Michael Page, are one distinct way of doing so. In order for us to be able to study this firm we need to know exactly how Michael Page works and how it differs from recruitment agencies and employment agencies. Accordingly, it is important to understand that Michael Page gets paid by its clients, companies utilizing Michael Page's services to find a candidate that matches the profile of the client's vacancy. Thus, Michael Page searches for a candidate to match their client more so than the other way around, yet the latter is also important as Michael Page strives to build long lasting relationships with candidates. Contrary to HR professionals and hiring managers, professional recruiters only account for a small portion of the employment industry and almost exclusively focus on knowledge workers. Professional recruiters are also knowledge workers themselves and the competitive 'up or out' culture and typical hierarchical pyramid structure of the recruitment firm results in only the most successful recruiters remaining at the firm. It is important to note that the perspective of professional recruiters is not only underexplored but also very unique, our research can thus provide a yet unshared view on the distortion caused by biases present in employment interviews.

Another difference from other companies in their industry is the fact that Michael Page does not conduct the final interviews, these are still conducted by the client. Instead, Michael Page facilitates in finding the right candidates for its clients, the interviews held by Michael Page are therefore more broad and focused on getting to know the candidate's profile better. Because recruitment firms only have introductory interviews that often take place weeks or even months before the final interview, Michael Page is able to conduct a more casual yet thorough interview.

## 2.4 Data Collection

### 2.4.1 Primary Data Collection

Primary data is collected with the main purpose of answering the research question (Merriam, 2002). Most of the data we use is primary data that we collect through 12 semi structured interviews averaging 45 minutes in length. As mentioned before, the first interview is used as a preliminary interview in order to refine our scope, this interview is conducted over the internet with our main contact person. The following ten interviews are conducted in an interview room at the office of Michael Page in Munich, we believe that this confidential setting helps to increase the quality of the responses. The last interview is conducted with our contact person three weeks after the main interviews took place, in order to provide us with the possibility to reflect and answer any questions that were raised during the first analysis of the empirical data. The last interview is also conducted over the internet using video calling software, we do acknowledge that using video calling software may decrease the knowledge transfer capacity between the two parties (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). However, we ensure that both interviewers and the interviewee are in a private room at the time of these interviews which subsequently raises the level of confidentiality and openness in the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). We planned 12 interviews to ensure having enough empirical data in case unforeseen circumstances prevents a recruiter from being interviewed, and to have a diverse and sizable pool of information.

## 2.4.2 Secondary Data Collection

Contrary to primary data, secondary data is originally collected for a different purpose than answering our research question (Merriam, 2009). The limited amount of secondary data used in our research contains internal documents by Michael Page, these documents include best practices and interview guides Michael Page distributes to its employees. These documents help us to understand how much of perceived distortion caused by biases is recognized by Michael Page and how much of this knowledge is possessed on an individual level, it furthermore tells us what practices to handle distortion caused by bias in interviews are known and encouraged by Michael Page. Secondary data is also drawn from academic literature to sustain our background and conceptual framework.

## 2.4.3 Sample

In order for our sample to be a representative cross section of the recruiters at Michael Page we want to ensure that our interviewees are diverse in experience, gender, age and hierarchical position. Our contact person gave us access to the open office in Munich where 40 professional recruiters work and also provided an introduction to the team. We were then able to approach all the professional recruiters and gather a very diverse sample. Since our study is qualitative we do not need a randomized sample which is used to obtain more accurate statistical findings (Ryen, 2004); instead our sample can be described as a targeted sample (Merriam, 2009); yet as previously mentioned, we ensure the diversity of our sample selection.

## 2.5 Empirical Data Analysis

During the interviews that we conduct, one of the interviewers is tasked with a more passive role that allows for thorough note taking. The interview is simultaneously being recorded and immediately transcribed to ensure full capture of any context-dependent content. In order to

maximize the outcome of the data analysis we analyse the data immediately after the interview has taken place. Once the interviews are transcribed, we codify the transcription in order to have a good overview of the different themes discussed, this helps us to make sense of the data. As we are using an abductive approach, the themes we create are influenced by our theoretical knowledge and preconceptions. However, during the thematization we make sure to stay open minded to new perspectives and angles we did not anticipate (Alvesson, 2004).

It is important to note that the data in the analysis goes through two filters as the interview questions are interpreted and answered by the interviewees which are the origins of the audio files and transcriptions, these transcriptions are subsequently interpreted by the researchers (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). These transcripts are called ‘primary interpretations’ whereas the researchers’ interpretations of these transcripts are called ‘secondary interpretations’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). These secondary interpretations are the most prominent part of the data analysis, it is here that we explore the data and analyse the meaning of the data on a subjective level taking the context into consideration.

## 2.6 Reflexivity

To ensure that this thesis reflects the thoughts of the interviewees we aim to be aware of our own assumptions and biases in order to minimize the influence of this preconceived knowledge. To raise awareness of our own assumptions and biases we take at least 30 minutes after each interview to analyse our thoughts and compare our notes with the transcribed material. This time gives us the opportunity to reflect and understand our own individual biases and makes it therefore easier to minimize the influence of these biases (Morrow, 2005). Because all interviews are conducted by two researchers, the researcher in the passive role is able to ask a follow up question or even repeat a question to clear up any uncertainties to ensure that we interpreted their answers correctly. Whereas if the interview is conducted by only one interviewer, asking repetitive questions may come across as excessive. In sum, by



using these follow up questions we ensure that any gaps or uncertainties in the data collected from our interviewees are not filled up or explained with our own biases, instead the collected data will reflect the interviewee's view of the reality as close as possible (Morrow, 2005).

## 2.7 Quality of the Research

Merriam (2009) states that all research should be conducted in an ethical manner and should produce reliable and valid knowledge. Given that we are conducting qualitative research we do not claim to find generalizable statistics and validation of the results is thus less applicable (Bryman, 2011). As for reliability, we believe that being able to pick our own interviewees increases the results' reliability considerably.

In order to minimize the influence of any individual perceptions or biases, we furthermore ensure to interview people with varying recruiting experience, gender, race and hierarchical position. By including, on one hand, people with multiple years of experience we make sure that we get diversity in answers. On the other hand, by also interviewing professional recruiters that only have limited experience we make sure that we obtain information that might be ignored by more experienced consultants out of familiarity.

Not only do we guarantee to reduce the impact of external factors on the quality of the results, we also want to minimize the impact of internal factors such as the influence of our own biases on the interpretation of the results. When analysing the collected data, we therefore not only evaluate it together but we also ensured to take enough time to individually examine the data without influencing each other's interpretation. After writing down our own interpretations we are then able to compare these findings, which often also allow for a more intricate analysis.



## 3 Theoretical Framework

It is important to mention that the complexity of this topic is unorthodox as we intertwine different fields of research such as Recruitment and Selection, Organizational Behaviour, Managerial Psychology and Knowledge Management. Hence, In this chapter we display theory to facilitate the understanding and analysis of the empirical material. The first area is focused on literature in respect to perceiving distortion caused by biases. The next section displays literature which revolves around the handling of distortion caused by biases. And the final part of this chapter displays and discusses literature in regards to Knowledge Management and Innovation.

### 3.1 Perceiving Distortion Caused by Biases

#### 3.1.1 Distortion Caused by Candidate Inflicted Biases

The most prominent candidate inflicted biases that affect employment interviews can be categorized as ‘social desirability’ and ‘impression management’, and although impression management is similar to social desirability, the former covers a broader spectrum of behaviours that distort the validity of information gathered in the employment interview. The following paragraphs elaborate on these terms in order to provide a better understanding of their impact.

Edwards (1957) and Paulhus (2002) describe the phenomenon of social desirability as a bias that individuals are prone to perform, both purposely and inadvertently to adhere and be accepted in a specific setting by others. Moreover, social desirability exists when “respondents want to avoid looking bad in front of an interviewer” (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2001, p.3), or desire to gain social approval by responding in certain ways which neglect to

reflect their true self (Huang, Liao & Chang, 1998; King & Bruner, 2000). In simple terms, the social desirability bias can be understood as anything that leads others to believe that the individual fits the norms and values expected in a certain social circle, which in our case can be an organization.

In regards to impression management, Roulin, Bangerter and Levashina (2014) and Tedeschi (2013) explain that this concept is always present in employment interviews and argue that this phenomenon considerably influences the recruiters' evaluations. To be more specific, Roulin, Bangerter and Levashina (2014) and Tedeschi (2013) describe impression management as any behaviour that is carried out and, as a consequence, influences an observer in a way that is deceiving. It is key to mention that impression management happens both deliberately and unintentionally, yet both are inconvenient and counterproductive in different degrees. More about this phenomenon is explained following.

Some examples of impression management are shown by Levashina and Campion (2007), and include: 'slight image creation', which refers to minor attempts at faking to create the image of a good candidate. 'Extensive image creation', which refers to more extreme faking behaviours, such as inventing work experience. 'Image protection', which refers to defensive tactics such as omitting being fired. And 'deceptive ingratiation', which refers to behaviours such as complimenting the recruiter. Weiss and Feldman (2006) have also subdivided impression management in categories such as: 'self-promotion', which refers to candidates overemphasizing the mastery of a skill or achievement. 'Enhancements', which speaks about candidates promoting themselves as an overall good individual, almost a martyr. And 'entitlements', which refers to a candidate assuming ownership of a positive achievement usually attained in a group or organization. Lastly, Roulin, Bangerter and Levashina (2015) construct impression management from different types such as: 'honest impression management', which includes 'honest self-promotion' and 'honest ingratiation'. Another type is 'defensive impression management', this takes place when the candidate attempts to repair or hide negative images by omitting information or providing justifications. And lastly,

‘deceptive impression management’, which entails both ‘slight’ and ‘extensive image creation’ as well as ‘deceptive ingratiation’.

### 3.1.2 Distortion Caused by Recruiter Inflicted Biases

While observing the other side of the interviewing table, it is recognized that distortion caused by biases is not unique to candidates, distortion also originates from biases held by the recruiters. Among those biases, we recognize the possible ‘prejudice’ caused by specifics of the applicant demographics; on this topic, Macan (2009) provides substantial literature which examines the effects of applicant demographics and characteristics on interviewer judgments, such as gender, race, disability and pregnancy, to mention a few. Macan (2009) claims that more often than not, these characteristics have an impact on the interviewer’s judgment, both positively and negatively, in different degrees. Moreover, the ‘overconfidence effect’ is recognized to take place among professional recruiters when interviewing, the overconfidence effect is described as a very well established bias respecting to individuals being less careful when making decisions as a result of continuous success obtained while performing a specific task (Dunning, Griffin, Milojkovic & Ross, 1990). In similar fashion, the ‘ostrich bias’ is a relevant bias as it is found to occur in employment interviews (Karlsson, Loewenstein & Seppi, 2009). It is explained that people influenced by the ostrich bias tend to overlook negative elements to validate the overall liking of a thing, situation or person, and thus avoid the psychological stress that can be caused by factoring in the negative sides that are present but purposely overseen (Karlsson, Loewenstein and Seppi, 2009). Along the same lines, ‘anchoring’ is a bias found to occur on the interviewer’s side as well, Furnham and Boo (2011) and English (2016) delves into this topic and states that anchoring is a cognitive bias which is a rather common human proneness to focus heavily on the positive information that is gathered in first impressions, and thus predisposes people to make favourable decisions based on this first item that caused a great impression, also labelled as the ‘anchor’. Similarly, the anchoring bias also works with negative information; for instance, if the interviewer realizes a grammar error in the application, this interviewer might be biased negatively because of it and perhaps pass on a great candidate.

Lastly, we explore the ‘halo effect’, which is slightly similar to the anchoring bias. The halo effect is a phenomenon that can be found to occur when interviewers focus on the overall good impression of an individual and thus impacting the overall evaluation of other elements (Rosenzweig, 2014). In simple terms, Rosenzweig (2014) explains that certain people are charismatic and thus take attention away from smaller negative details. For example, a candidate that is quite optimistic, warm, friendly, good-looking, well dressed and well spoken is likely to carry this halo and thus, the interviewer may ignore minor negative details that in fact may be crucial (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

## 3.2 Overall Handling of Biases in Employment Interviews

Recent literature has placed focus on the ability to detect and handle biases towards a less distorted employment interview, yet literature shows a lot of controversies on these topics. On one hand, literature states that training can help interviewers identify impression management (Howard & Ferris, 1996; Roulin, Bangerter & Levashina 2015). It is also argued that the type of interview question can positively affect impression management detection and lessen the impact of biases, it is furthermore suggested that detection of deceptive tactics used by applicants may be possible if interviewers use appropriate methods, such as speech disturbances and purposeful response intermission, which refers to the recruiters purposely using gaps of time to slightly stress the recruiter (Roulin, Bangerter and Levashina 2015).

Likewise, making the candidate aware of the usage of impression management tactics showed to have a positive effect on the accuracy of the content delivered (Law, Bourdage & O'Neill, 2016). On the other hand, Powell and Roulin (2015) as well as Roulin, Bangerter, and Levashina (2015) argue that the interviewer’s experience is ineffective, and possibly counterproductive, towards correctly identifying distorted information, these authors explain that being experienced might lead to self-assurance when interviewing or making hiring

decisions. A study conducted by Roulin, Bangerter and Levashina (2015) showed that only 13 to 23 percent of distorted information delivered was successfully detected by interviewers. Reinhard, Scharmach and Müller (2013) support these findings by stating that detection abilities of distorted responses are similar to chance levels; more precisely, their study shows that interviewers were only successful half of the time. Similarly, Roulin (2016) conducted a study with a pool of 250 informants and the results suggest that attempting to detect impression management in the employment interview was mostly unsuccessful. Thus, there is contradicting literature regarding the ability to cancel out biases and distorted information; this is alarming as it sheds light on the reality that most employment interviews are distorted, yet it is still unclear and no consensus has been found of what can be done to improve the quality of the information gathered in the employment interview.

Moreover, many authors agree that the ideal handling of an employment interview does not depend on a single group of elements, it is rather caused by a well orchestrated employment interview (Macan, 2009; Roulin, 2016; Ryan and Ployhart, 2014), which can only be achieved by the combination of a series of different elements. For instance, Breugh (2013) and Cable (2013) establish that many elements such as the context, environment, channels of communication and content have an impact on the overall assessing, interviewing and recruiting of ideal candidates. Many other elements are recognized to have an effect on the overall handling of employment interviews as well, for instance, Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin and Jones (2005) as well as Klotz et al. (2013) found that individuals who viewed a recruiter as having been personable, trustworthy, informative and competent were more open with the recruiter; moreover, these authors nicely summarize the studies that have been conducted with regard to recruiter behaviour and its relation to a successful employment interview. In the same area, Richman, Kiesler, Weisband and Drasgow (1999) argue that confidentiality has a substantial impact on the degree of distortion caused by biases that are present in interviewing interactions, they explain that confidentiality in the interview process has a positive effect in reducing distortion. Lastly, Roulin (2016) extensively researches the presence and handling of biases in the employment interview and establishes that: an intrinsic curiosity about others, possessing the trait of social sensibility, as well as a pre existing

cognitive ability to understand others are found to be effective in regards to enhancing the results of an employment interview. O'Sullivan and Ekman (2004) refer to these individuals as 'deception wizards', which are in fact quite rare to come across, in a study conducted by (Bond & Uysal, 2007) the researchers only spotted 29 'deception wizards' in a pool of 12,000 participants, this statistic speak to the reality that most recruiters are likely to be far from ideal.

It is also observed that stress is a constant factor that exists in employment interviews, authors such as Finnerty, Muralidhar, Nguyen, Pianesi, and Gatica-Perez, (2016) argue that stress during job interviews is unavoidable and that it cannot be completely cancelled out, yet it can be lessened. Moreover, these authors found "that applicants with higher stress ratings scored lower on hireability, showing evidence that stress as perceived by external observers had a negative impact on performance during a job interview and it's outcome" (Finnerty et al. 2006, p.331).

Interestingly, there also is much discussion in regards to the ideal amount of structure that an employment interview must have. On this subject, Levashina and Campion (2006) as long as Lievens and De Paepe (2004) argue that structured interviews provide less opportunity for intentional distortion; however, some components of structure are likely to increase faking by candidates, hence no consensus is found. Similarly, Macan (2009) argues that researchers should pay close attention to good interview construction techniques as they have a substantial impact in the quality of the employment interview. Van Iddekinge, Raymark and Roth (2005) are in unison with the previous authors, and agree that interviews that are well designed and developed specifically to assess particular constructs display higher evidence of validity.



### 3.3 Knowledge Management and Innovation in a Recruitment Firm

As pre established, a substantial amount of the recruitment profession is heterogeneous and tacit as it heavily depends on embrained knowledge and cognitive skills (Alvesson & Johansson, 2001). Furthermore, some even consider this occupation as not exactly a profession (O'Mahoney, 2010), however it is undeniable that the recruitment profession and daily tasks are knowledge intensive. This led us to explore this phenomenon more in depth; we, therefore observe theory related to knowledge and knowledge management. The works by Polanyi (1962), Nonaka (1994), Blacker (1995), Gourlay (2006) and Newell, Robertson, Scarbrough and Swan (2009) are observed as these authors expatiate on theory which underlines the concept of knowledge. We explore these theories to solidify our understanding on how to differentiate between what behaviours can be considered tacit and explicit. Moreover, Michael Page goes to great lengths to remain innovative and competitive in their industry, this is achieved substantially by turning new innovative actions by professional recruiters into explicit knowledge that can be diffused across the company; hence the works by Nonaka, (1994), Nonaka and Konno (1998) are utilized as they provide valuable insights regarding knowledge management and organizational knowledge creation, these studies are elaborated below.

There is consensus on the argument that “knowledge is a very broad and difficult concept (Alvesson, 2004, p42). Knowledge can be categorized in many types, yet the most recognized forms are tacit and explicit. Polanyi (1962) explains that explicit knowledge is that which has been spelled out or codified; hence, it is easy to diffuse across the organization. While tacit knowledge regards skills and know-how which people gain over time, therefore it depends on each person’s experience in specific contexts; consequently, tacit knowledge is tough to formalize and communicate (Polanyi, 1962). Similarly, Nonaka (1994) explains that tacit knowledge refers to the knowledge that individuals have based on their personal experience

and is hard to express or articulate. Moreover, Nonaka (1994) explains that explicit knowledge refers to knowledge that can be communicated or written down, and then easily communicated to others across the organizations. Blackler (1995) looks at the types of knowledge in a deeper manner and explains different types of common knowledge, such as: ‘embedded’, ‘encoded’, ‘embrained’, ‘embodied’ and ‘encultured’. ‘Embedded’ knowledge resides within systematic routines, it relates to the relationships between roles, technologies, formal procedures and emergent routines; it is locked in processes, products, culture, routines, artefacts, or structures. ‘Encoded’ knowledge is information that is conveyed in signs, symbols, books, manuals and databases. Encoded knowledge can also be described as decontextualized into codes of practice. ‘Embrained’ knowledge is dependant on conceptual skills and cognitive abilities, ‘embodied’ knowledge is action oriented and is only partly explicit. Lastly, ‘encultured’ knowledge refers to the knowledge that exists as shared understanding caused by the development of an organizational culture (Blackler, 1995).

However, knowledge is a element that is highly ambiguous; Gourlay (2006) explains that tacit and explicit knowledge are mutually constituted and that by attempting to make anything explicit, we automatically imply other things into the background or into tacitness, thus it is argued that there is no such a thing as purely tacit or purely explicit knowledge as one type always depends on the other in different degrees. Gourlay (2006) further explains that tacit knowledge is better described as a continuum where the degree of tacitness and explicitness varies depending on the content of the knowledge communicated. Along the same lines as the latter author, Polanyi (1962) states that all knowledge contains an innate personal component which depends on the circumstances. Hence, it is fair to advocate that different people, with varying past experiences, interpret different things from similar information (Newell et al. 2009). In sum, knowledge is characterized as: ‘equivocal’, as it subject to different meanings and interpretations, ‘dynamic’ as some accepted meanings vary as actors and contexts change, and ‘context dependant’, given that knowledge is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to separate from the context where it originates (Newell et al. 2009).

Regarding theory about Knowledge Management and Organizational Knowledge Creation, Newell et al. (2009, p.2) mention that “knowledge management, for example, has been heralded as essential to efforts to improve competitiveness and innovation”. It is recognized that knowledge, as money or any other resource, must be accumulated and moved around “[...] for the good of the organization. In short, more knowledge equals more profits” (Newell et al. 2009, p.13).

Nonaka (1994) advocates that individual cognition has a pivotal role in knowledge creation, as he suggests that organizational knowledge creation originates from the individual. Furthermore, Nonaka, Toyama and Konno (2000) argue that while new knowledge is developed by individuals, organizations have a crucial role in articulating and establishing that knowledge, this can be interpreted as management having responsibility on which behaviours are converted from tacit to explicit. Similarly, Alvesson (2004, p.5) states that “knowledge built into an organization’s culture and into people’s ways of thinking and doing things in a company cannot be easily copied and is thus the resource that potentially provides real competitive advantage”.

Hence, it is recognized that transforming individual tacit knowledge into more explicit knowledge augments the organization’s competitive advantage. Hence, the SECI model by Nonaka, Toyama and Konno (2000) is used in this study to better understand and categorize our findings as they convey theory regarding knowledge transformation. Deconstructing the SECI model, it is established that: ‘socialization’ is the procedure of sharing tacit knowledge through observation, imitation, practice in formal or informal groups. ‘Externalization’ is the process of articulating internalized tacit knowledge into explicit forms, this process is the pivotal for the creation and sharing of knowledge. ‘Combination’ is the process of merging concepts into a knowledge structure. And, ‘internalization’ which is the stage in which individuals make sense out of explicit knowledge, and thus generating new tacit knowledge, which permits the spiral of continuity in knowledge creation. Furthermore, Nonaka and Konno (1998) expand on organizational knowledge creation by presenting the concept of ‘ba’. This concept is founded on the idea that knowledge cannot be separated from context.

Consequently, it is argued that successful knowledge creation is dependant on individuals sharing space with others from whom they want to learn from or learn with. These authors further explain that this shared space may be a physical, virtual, or mental. The concept of ba is highly relevant to our study as it is argued that in knowledge intensive firms, managers need to provide the necessary enabling context for individuals to share and create knowledge (Nonaka and Konno, 1998).



## 4 Empirical Findings

The focus of our study strives to showcase how professional recruiters perceive and handle the distortion caused by of biases in employment interviews. The empirical data was gathered through semi structured face-to-face interviews. Eleven professional recruiters have been interviewed for this chapter, the data obtained through these interviews is presented in manner not specific to seniority nor chronology; instead, the data is presented to best fit theoretical framework. Furthermore, it is salient to mention that our findings are not a blueprint to decrease distortion caused by biases in employment interviews, instead the findings were focused on better understanding and analysing how professional recruiters perceive and handle the presence of biases in a very qualitative manner.

### 4.1 Perceiving Distortion Caused by Biases

#### 4.1.1 Candidate Inflicted Distortion

While conducting our interviews, it became undebatable clear that *“one of the main concerns with interviewing is that wanting to look as a perfect candidate is almost a norm”* (Interviewee C). Similarly, one of the professional recruiters manifests that *“very rarely we have candidates that are naturally honest about everything, I wish they knew that this is gold. We, and our clients, highly value that”* (Interviewee D). So one question arises, do candidates realize that being vulnerable and willing to show their downsides actually helps them? Apparently, professional recruiters believe that even if candidates are made aware of it, *“it is human nature to want to look good and hard to cancel out this”* (Interviewee L) even if this in fact hurts their chances. Hence, it is expected for applicants to often use impression management in employment interviews, and such distortion considerably influence recruiters’ evaluations of their performance.

When interviewing the recruiters, some mentioned that there are questions that always have the same answers and thus these questions are mainly used to gather meta-data more than answers themselves. For instance, one recruiter mentions the he usually asks: *“tell me more about meeting deadlines and working well with others”* (Interviewee B) and then he elaborates and tells us that *“every candidate will give positive and socially acceptable answers to these questions, when truth is that a substantial amount of people struggle with deadlines or do not work well with others”* (Interviewee B).

In other cases, professional recruiters have noticed that *“Some people may be ashamed of how much they were making and lie because of that, not necessarily greed or create a better image than reality, but to protect their ego somehow”* (Interviewee L). Interestingly, professional recruiters notice that the presence of impression management is more norm than exception. Moreover, it is even more difficult to understand the motives behind impression management, which arguably are of much interest to a future employer. As aforementioned, some recruiters realize that at times *“some candidates do not realize they are omitting information or overlooking some important areas, thus it is hard to tell if this happens purposely or by chance... You can never discuss everything in an hour interview”* (Interviewee G). Another recruiter speaks to the similar topic and more concretely mentions: *“I mean... no one ever is really going to an interview and mentions that they were lying to their boss or mishandling internal information. But truth is, everyone has broken a work policy at one point or another, we just need to make sure that they are not the next Madoff”* (Interviewee F) referring to the mastermind behind the largest Ponzi scheme in which he stole more than \$17 billion dollars from investors. So the degree to which candidates omit information purposely is largely ambiguous and perhaps unrealistic to measure.

On another theme, few recruiters raise awareness on a topic that was rather thought provoking, they mentioned that candidates usually assume ownership of accomplishments of team achievements in previous jobs, one recruiter provides a peculiarly interesting example, he mentions that *“it is like a futbol match, one always secretly thinks the team won the match*

*because of oneself*” (Interviewee C). This also ties back to the desire to look good, yet this borders lying more than enhancing one’s image. Recruiters explain this well by stating that looking good by trying to present the best of oneself is not necessarily seen as an issue, what recruiters find to be challenging is that more often than not, candidates exaggerate or omit important facts that are of interest to future employers; this is what can be inconvenient and very costly to future employers.

#### 4.1.2 Recruiter Inflicted Distortion

Much is said about the candidate and their almost unavoidable will to present a perfect image and to come across as socially desirable. However, while interviewing professional recruiters we noticed that a substantial amount of the distortion is generated by the recruiters themselves. One respondent claims that *“a good amount of times, we are the ones hindering the outcome of the interview with our own doings and prejudices”* (Interviewee H). Although it is respectable to see that some professional recruiters have this level of awareness, it does open up a Pandora box and thus we dig deeper to see what are the ‘doings’ by recruiters that may substantially hinder the interviewing process.

One recruiter mentions that overconfidence is often a trap that most successful recruiters fall for, she explains: *“it is key to be humble, interviewing each candidate as if it was your first interview. Being overconfident makes you think that since you have been correct so many times in the past, you will again be correct without much effort. Being overconfident may allow the candidate to shape and present a deceptive image because little attention is being paid by the interviewer”* (Interviewee F). Another senior professional recruiter states similarly: *“when recruiting, we are often fairly confident that we will find the right person for the job. We get the best curriculum vitae, the best skills profile, the right experience. We convince ourselves that we ask the right question and make a rational decision with little thought and more gut feeling”* (Interviewee K). Hence, it can be argued that experience without the right mindset and handling of own biases and prejudices is counterproductive to successful interviewing.



The anchoring and halo biases emerged in few occasions as well when gathering information. These biases can, in fact, be the result of successful impression management by the candidate, a senior recruiter states that it is of absolute importance to “*remain detached from first impressions and very likable information, which can allow the respondent to succeed at creating a fake persona... for example... if a candidate went to Harvard, we consider that, but we must be able to detach ourselves from that fact and not influence our perception of other answers... and it is not easy for sure*” (Interviewee K). Another recruiter mentions that the most important thing for her was the first handshake with the candidate, she mentions that “*a weak handshake is a sign of incompetence and weakness... but a firm handshake, shows confidence, determination*” (Interviewee F), this finding is interesting as it shows how this minor detail can influence the recruiter to such extent. Similarly, one recruiter gives a similar example by stating that the “*body language, posture, movement tells you a lot about anxiety and confidence levels*” (Interviewee E). Yet, he also mentions that he does look at this but does not make it a pivotal factor.

Moreover, it is common knowledge that some people are just very likable and charismatic, people that can easily become friends with everyone, and although this is a trait that is well sought out by many companies, especially in industries such as consulting, it is also a trait that predisposes the recruiter to subconsciously sort out negative information, few professional recruiters were explicit on this and one recruiter explains that “*if the person had great charisma, we need to neutralize it or somehow filter out this charisma because it will make you ignore other very important areas*” (Interviewee E). Similarly, one senior recruiter declared that “*many times I have caught myself liking someone because the first thing they mentioned was that they went to a great university... and if fact... over the years I made some bad decisions because of that*” (Interviewee L). Thus, our findings suggest that much of the distortion of the perception and results of an interview are generated by the recruiters themselves.

## 4.2 Handling Distortion Caused by Biases

### 4.2.1 Embracing Biases

One respondent mentioned that *“it is crucial to understand that biases exist... Accepting this and being aware of them facilitates the discovery and handling of these biases”* (Interviewee B). Similarly, most professional recruiters homogeneously accept that *“biases will not disappear, but with self awareness we have realized that we can overcome it to a great extent.”* (Interviewee E). Respondents perceive and understand that although being aware of biases is not the solution, it is a good start. Being able to accept the fact that biases are a reality of life and that being biased is detached from being ill-intentioned or tricky is absolutely necessary to be successful at interviewing, given that at times, interviewees *“do not even know they are lying”* (Interviewee B). Or on occasions, they *“simply talk too much and get themselves in holes unnecessarily by trying to be extra social and friendly”* (Interviewee E).

It is interesting to learn that at the level of knowledge worker professional interviews, some candidates go to great lengths to really make a mark in the interview and hopefully get the job of their dreams, one professional recruiter states that *“sometimes you get people that pay for interview training and coaching to really score the job”* (Interviewee C). Moreover, it is well known that candidates do their research, homework and practice before the employment interview. One professional recruiter mentions that *“sometimes it is impossible to tell if the candidate is truly passionate about the company and knows all about it, or they simply spent all night investigating about the company”* (Interviewee L). It is key to highlight that most professional recruiters, as well as our hypothesis argue that the candidates they interview at this level of recruitment are not the average candidates, these candidates are quite smart and quick-witted, which if handled properly can help the interviewing process or hurt it if mishandled. Thus, recruiters are often unable or unsuccessful at correctly identifying when deceptive impression management is used. Yet, it can already be observed that the overall

handling of the interview process becomes of vital importance, more than single characteristics or behaviours by recruiters.

Nonetheless, the degree of awareness revolving biases presented by professional recruiters is admirable, it can be argued that this level of awareness is a result of training provided by Michael Page as well as practice. Some professional recruiters claim to conduct *“an average of 40 to 50 interviews a month”* (Interviewee D); this practice absolutely augments the cognitive capabilities of professional recruiters on being able to navigate through the abstract phenomena that takes place in interviews. Yet our findings also suggest that a high level of awareness differentiates to a high level of skillfulness, for instance one recruiter mentions that *“sometimes you have a feeling that the candidate is not being completely transparent, but you really do not find ways to have them open up to you, and it is sad because they would be a great fit for the job”* (Interview C). In simple terms, being aware of biases does not make professional recruiters great at dealing with them. This finding also points at the overall handling of the interview process being of more importance than single elements.

#### 4.2.2 The Right Balance

As previously mentioned, the handling of the overall interview is perceived to have a more substantial effect when it comes to managing and decreasing biases. Interestingly, along the same lines, a professional recruiter states that it is beneficial to *“think of creating a conversational environment more than an interview environment”* (Interviewee B), and similarly the greater majority of professional recruiters delivered the same message which explains that it is wise to avoid *“making it feel like an interview, instead... make it feel more like a normal talk. If you get someone at this level and they are interested and finds you as an equal partner, this works best to have them open up”* (Interviewee E).

Needless to say, job interviews are inherently tense and stressful situations for the candidate. Recruiters are aware that stress in interviews is close to unavoidable and it cannot be completely cancelled, yet it can be lessened and that it does have an impact on the interview.

Consequently, professional recruiters are keen to keep an eye on anxiety levels when interviewing as well, one recruiter mentions that *“If the candidate is stressed, which most of the times they are, their understanding of questions and responses are going to be influenced somehow”* (Interviewee G), hence it can be argued that the efforts by professional recruiters to create a transparent and judgement free zone has a positive effect on reducing biases. On the other hand, few recruiters raise an important issue which questions if creating a welcoming and judgement free environment is effective at all. The latter recruiters explain that purposely giving the sense of *“hey I am your friend, you can trust me, can make things worse because the candidates know we are watching every word they say, they know that we are not really their friends and that we get paid for this”* (Interviewee I). Similarly, another finding that goes in the opposite direction of the initial hypothesis is that by *“allowing the interview to become more friendly than professional... interviewees may be willing to push the limits and be more bold when answering, which can hurt the process as well”* (Interviewee K). And thus, this adds ambiguity to answering what the most effective environment is towards a successful interview.

On another topic, one senior professional recruiter states that at times using subtle stress provoking tactics helps to catch candidates off guard, and often that is what works best; he gives the example of *“asking a question in a different language”* (Interviewee L) as most professional workers at this level speak English or a second language; the recruiter claims that this tactic produces very genuine answers as the candidate is being tested in the same content from two different angles and *“it is mildly difficult for them to handle that in an interview because they are already paying attention to so many other details, such as posture, speech, body language”* (Interviewee D). Thus this can be considered as a stress provoking practice, which is not broadly used across the organization, yet it is worth mentioning.

Although we do not perceive the existence of any metric to measure how friendly the environment should be to decrease biases in interviewing, our findings posit that the perfect balance of professionalism and friendliness in an interview will produce the best results. Moreover, the creation of this perfectly balanced environment is dependant in much more

than just the recruiter, in fact, it has got to do a lot with the candidate as well, as one recruiter mentions that: *“it has got to be a combination of both... a friendly and professional environment, but it also depends on the candidate, how mature they are and what field they are in, et cetera”* (Interviewee L), this will guide the recruiter on how to go about creating a comfortable environment.

Thus, it is hard to tell if the efforts to create this comfortable environment is as effective as it is thought to be, given that very solid issues are raised by the professional recruiters who are the ones dealing with this on a day to day basis. Furthermore, recruiters do agree that lessening anxiety and stress levels will positively help the interviewing process; yet, what they rightfully question is if this attempt to create this ‘you can trust me’ environment might in fact be counter productive.

#### 4.2.3 No ‘One Size Fits All’

The interviews we conducted provided us with many interesting findings, one of them is that professional recruiters view interviews as unique interactions. Some professional recruiters even argue that *“interviews are like fingerprints, each interview is unique and should not be imitated”* (Interviewee C). This statement and idea speaks loudly to the thought of how *“one size does not fit all, you have got to adjust. The same type of interviewing or setting will not work for a generation Y person as well as for an older candidate”* (Interviewee G). This ideology is shared unanimously by all recruiters who understand that every candidate requires a very specific way of interviewing; the customization of interviewing depends largely on many factors, such as industry, age, gender and work experience. Professional recruiters do realize that by taking these factors into consideration, they also run the risk of generalization, and thus these factors are very carefully used more as an intrinsic guide than as an explicit guide. Similarly, the previous knowledge, understanding and background of the recruiter will also inevitably impact understanding and follow up of questions. Hence, it is established that many factors and characteristics by both, the candidate and recruiter have an impact on the interview.

Furthermore, most recruiters find it very effective to start off an interview by connecting and breaking the ice with practical questions and ‘small talk’ towards “*creating a base.... to have conversational points*” (Interviewee G). Michael Page as an institution recognizes the need for high customization in interviews and hence allows professional recruiters to bring in their own mind and skills to be able to customize the interview; nonetheless, Michael Page does expect the interview plan to be followed. In other words, professional recruiters must “*use the template and be ready to detour, yet come back to the template*” (Interviewee F). Moreover, this customization does not have a specific set of prescription nor moulds, professional recruiters must build the plane as they fly it, so to speak; a senior professional recruiter mentions that “*this is a skill that can be guided but not taught... this is what differentiates a good recruiter from a great recruiter*” (Interviewee J).

Professional recruiters also argue that a well prepared, customized, yet at the same time structured job interview helps them stay on course with obtaining the desired information, “*by designing and following a truly selective and robust interview process, which at times may sound as a redundant interview does help to get more genuine answers*” (Interviewee I). Hence, the findings give us grounds to argue that having the ability to design an ideally customized interview while tweaking during the interview, makes a difference between an average interview and a successful interview.

All in all, teaching professional recruiters that one size does not fit all is not a challenge; yet teaching them how to create the perfect interview that best suits each candidate is what can be guided but not necessarily taught. Much research has looked into what is the ideal taxonomy and measure of the interview structure, and thus far, the results as well as our findings show that a semi structured interview yields the best results, hence this can be established for our case. Nonetheless, what is still highly debatable is to what extent can a recruiter handle and carry out a successful semi structured interview as the previous knowledge and background of each recruiter cannot be measured nor tested. Moreover, a concern that recruiters face is that they are very limited to the information they have from the candidate as well as what type of

information they can ask for, which leads to assumption-making being a norm more than an exception.

#### 4.2.4 Traits Rather Than Training

As previously mentioned, one main concern for professional recruiters is the ambiguity of creating a friendly and welcoming environment. Our findings show that this behaviour may at times be counterproductive and be seen as a trick up the recruiters' sleeve leading to decreased trust and increased anxiety. However, there is another side of the coin which shows that by professional recruiters genuinely caring and showing interest in candidates needs and wants, candidates are keen to open up and put their guard down. One professional recruiter states that *“a personal touch is very important, getting to know the person, find out what do they need, their motivations and start from there”* (Interviewee C), similarly, it is suggested to *“make up a base, build that bridge, get them to understand that they can be honest with you without any fears, that would only help”* (Interviewee G). Another recruiter mentions that it is useful to *“find out what is important to candidates and keep that in mind throughout the process. To actually really analyse any content revolving that ‘thing’ that is important to them makes reading between the lines a much easier task, because then you have a motive, and learning the true motive is half the battle.”* (Interviewee B).

Moreover, senior recruiters state that *“being genuinely curious makes a great recruiter, but you cannot really teach someone to be curious about other people”* (Interviewee G). We noticed that the most successful professional recruiters among the ones we interviewed seemed to all demonstrate an intrinsic curiosity about other people, which arguably led them to be naturally good at getting to know people. They had a natural curiosity and focus more in quality of conversations, our findings suggested that these successful recruiters held interviews that lasted longer than average, which also points at their interest of quality instead of quantity. One respondent mentioned that *“at this level of professional interviewing, candidates can tell if you genuinely care to get to know them or if you are just interrogating them by using friendly tactics”* (Interviewee I). Hence, one salient question emerges: can

everyone become a professional recruiter, or is it a skill that only few can fulfil as it has much to do the recruiters' background and intrinsic characteristics, which cannot be taught; characteristics such as being genuinely curious about other people. Thus far, our findings show that successful interviews are partly based on an open and honest conversation. Moreover, our findings indicate that the recruiter must have certain characteristics that they bring into the job such as an intrinsic curiosity about others in order to have successful interviews.

### 4.3 Knowledge Management and Innovation in a Recruitment Firm

One subtle finding that constantly emerged in all the interviews is the fact that each professional recruiter conducts their interviews in heterogeneous ways, hence practices and behaviours by professional recruiters are not a constant, in fact these practices and behaviours are very dependant on each professional recruiters' preference.

As aforementioned, Michael Page expects the professional recruiter to follow a certain guide and best practices, yet the organization allows them to customize each interview for best results. Furthermore, when referring to allowed methods and behaviours to handle and decrease biases, a senior professional recruiter states that *"as long as the method works, and is ethical, they are good to go"* (Interviewee L). Similarly, managers at Michael Page state that if they were to roughly measure the degree of tacitness and explicitness of the practices that take place overall, they assert that *"about 60 percent of the behaviours are established and shared among all the professional recruiters while the remaining 40 percent is more trial and error, as well as improvised"* (Interviewee K).

Michael Page measures success quantitatively and qualitatively. Managers measure each professional recruiter's performance by how many successful placements they achieve on a monthly basis, this is thus a quantitative assessment. On the other hand, the quality of the



placements is measured by how long the selected candidate lasts in each company. Ultimately, the recruiter must be cautious and very competent when interviewing each candidate. One manager states that *“although the recruiters have free range on what other things they can bring and do, they are always upping the standards and being quite innovative, in good ways; after all... their job and salary depends on it”* (Interviewee K). Michael Page does recognize that each professional recruiter brings in value with new ideas and practices. Moreover, given the knowledge intensive nature of the recruiting profession, Michael Page devotes significant efforts and resources to capture practices and behaviours that have demonstrated to be valuable when handling and decreasing distortion caused by biases in interviews. One senior professional recruiter declares that *“there is a talent development department in which new developments are taken into account. The top performers are invited in to brainstorm new practical knowledge, problematize it, debate it, test it and then if the team decides... it becomes a norm, then this new norm is taught with trainings which happen every month, it also gets posted on a platform on the internet for future training purposes”* (Interviewee L). The provided example is an evident and salient manner of how Michael Page is proactive and supportive of innovation as means of remaining competitive in its industry, validating the fact that the professional recruiters are creators, explorers and exploiters of any new knowledge created in this knowledge intensive firm.

On the same topic, managers at Michael Page are also aware that there is knowledge held by each professional recruiter that cannot necessarily be made explicit in a short period of time, such as in a meeting or a talent development session. One recruiter mentions that *“new hires join experienced recruiters in job interviews and can assimilate the ‘fingerspitzengefühl’ that these veteran interviewers have perfected over the years... in fact, we tell the ‘newbies’ to pay close attention to what the experienced recruiters do and say as well as what they don't do and don't say.”*; hence, managers at Michael Page make an effort to have newer professional recruiters socialize and join more experienced well-performing recruiters in live interviews as well as outside of work in order for the newer recruiters to absorb any tacit knowledge that is not easily put into words. It is furthermore interesting that managers at Michael Page speak constantly about moving forward with innovation regarding recruitment and selection, one

manager mentions *“our profits are based on successful placements, mainly the quality of them more than the quantity, because the quality is what keeps the clients coming back to us... So it is very important to find the best of the best out there for our clients.., that is why we need to remain competitive and better than competitors”* (Interviewee L).

All in all, the empirical findings presented in this chapter have led us to many realizations and to a better and more thorough understanding of professional recruiters’ perceptions revolving the handling and lessening of biases towards a more fruitful employment interview. The following chapter merges these empirical findings and relevant theory to facilitate a more analytical and descriptive discussion in a consolidated manner, which is illustrated in the following table.

Discovered themes to be discussed	Summary	Sample statement	Degree of tacitness / explicitness of the action
Perceiving the Distortion Caused by Biases in Employment Interview	Social Desirability / Impression Management	The employment interview is by nature an occasion in which candidates show the best of themselves, at times more than true.	Tacit or partly tacit
	Embracing Biases	Recruiters accept the distortion caused by biases to a certain extent without discrediting the candidate.	Tacit or partly tacit
	Confidence in Own Ability	Recruiters are blinded by continuous success which feeds overconfidence, yet this undermines successful employment interviews	Tacit or partly tacit
	Limited Self Reflection	Recruiters are fast to acknowledge distortion caused by candidates, yet they rarely reflected on the distortion they created themselves	Tacit or partly tacit
Handling the Distortion Caused by Biases in Employment Interview	Limited Explicit Guidelines	Michael Page is a knowledge intensive firm, and hence most of the practices that take place are innovative, trial and error, and tacit.	Tacit or partly tacit
	No 'One Size Fits All'	Employment interviews as well as the distortion created by biases are highly contextual and should be treated so. Attempting to come up with explicit rigid systems is counterproductive.	Explicit or partly explicit
	The Right Balance Friendly / Professional	As employment interviews are highly contextual it is important to find the right balance of friendliness and professionalism in order to decrease the distortion caused by biases.	Tacit or partly tacit
	The Right Balance Stress / No Stress	As employment interviews are highly contextual it is also important to find the right amount of stress in order to decrease the distortion caused by biases.	Tacit or partly tacit
	Traits Rather Than Training	Attempting to train the perfect recruiter may be impossible, instead focus should be placed in hiring recruiters with specific traits	Tacit or partly tacit
	Knowledge Management and Innovation	Michael Page profitability and reputation solely depend on successful placements, hence Michael Page must remain competitive via innovation; this is achieved Perfect Knowledge Creation Habitat	Tacit and Explicit



# 5 Discussion

In this chapter we discuss relevant themes by combining our empirical findings and theory that pertains to our study. This chapter is divided in three areas. The first section discusses how the recruiters perceive distortion caused by biases. The next contains discussion regarding how recruiters handle distortion caused by biases. And the final section discusses knowledge and knowledge management practices in a recruitment firm.

## 5.1 Perceiving Distortion Caused by Biases

### 5.1.1 Candidate Inflicted Distortion

Interestingly, none of the recruiters are native English speakers and therefore not all are familiar with the term ‘bias’, yet after explaining this phenomenon in further detail, each recruiter recognizes the phenomenon and is able to illustrate multiple examples of distortion caused by candidate inflicted biases. Moreover, the recruiters perceive the candidates as if they want to present a better version of themselves, try to match the job description and gain social approval. Commonly distorted answers that most recruiters mention involve the candidate’s daily tasks and skills. These examples are in line with the works by Weiss and Feldman (2006) who state that applicants use deception during the interview in order to conform to the job requirements; and with the findings of Huang, Liao and Chang, (1998) and King and Bruner, (2000) that state that candidates respond dishonestly to gain social approval. The recruiters also found that by giving the candidate multiple vacancy options rather than discussing only one vacancy during the interview, leads the candidates to provide more accurate answers relating their skill set, we believe that our findings augment the works of Weiss and Feldman (2006), as providing candidates with an array of options, allows them to be honest and not bridge the gap between skill sets to better fit one job vacancy. The findings

discussed in the beginning of this paragraph are also in line with theory by Levashina and Campion (2007) who found that candidates try to create an image of a good candidate and might even invent work experience to do so.

### 5.1.2 Embracing Biases

It is interesting to see that recruiters accept distortion caused by biases to a certain extent without discrediting the candidate. The recruiter moreover perceives that it is human nature to want to look good and that this is basically unavoidable; these findings are in line with those of Roulin, Bangerter and Levashina (2014) and Tedeschi (2013) who explain that impression management is always present in employment interviews to a certain extent. After analysing the amount of distortion that is accepted without discrediting the candidate, we find that the recruiters allow the candidate to exercise self-promotion, which refers to candidates overemphasizing the mastery of a skill or achievement (Weiss & Feldman, 2006), as well as honest impression management which includes honest self-promotion, such as highlighting their academic achievement and honest ingratiation, such as purposely complementing the recruiter on his or her outfit (Roulin, Bangerter & Levashina, 2015). We argue that honest impression management increases the effectiveness of the interview, as candidates promoting their own skills save the recruiter valuable time; for recruiters only have limited time to assess the skill set of the candidate, and they can be more effective when this time is not wasted on obtaining information that the candidate may easily bring to light with honest impression management.

### 5.1.3 Confidence in Own Ability

Not only did we find that the recruiters recognized that biases causes distortion in interviews but, also, that they were eminently confident in their ability to spot these biases. Additionally, professional recruiters believe that it takes a certain amount of experience in order to spot biases in interviews. These findings are contradictory to a quantitative study by Roulin, Bangerter and Levashina (2015), that suggests that interviewers are, overall, rarely successful

in recognizing impression management in interviews. We suggest that the difference in our findings and those of Roulin, Bangerter and Levashina (2015) could be caused by the difference in research design. Whereas Roulin, Bangerter and Levashina (2015) used mock interviews with inexperienced students, the interviews discussed in our thesis were conducted with experienced knowledge workers. These knowledge workers needed less image creation to answer the questions as they could draw their answers from their experience. We therefore question if the study by Roulin, Bangerter and Levashina (2015) would yield different results if it was conducted in a real life setting with experienced knowledge workers.

Nevertheless, we remain sceptical about the ability of the recruiters to accurately spot distortion caused by biases as this is such an exceptional skill to master. Some authors find the mastery of this skill so rare that they call successful spotters of distortion ‘deception wizards’ (Bond & Uysal, 2007; O’Sullivan & Ekman, 2004). Others argue that the detection abilities of distorted responses are similar to chance levels (Reinhard, Scharmach & Müller, 2014). Therefore, we argue that the large amount of recruiters that claim to be successful at spotting biases in our findings can be assigned to the overconfidence effect, which in short explains that after performing a similar task multiple times people can become overly confident in their judgement which, objectively seen, might not be accurate (Dunning et al. 1990). The overconfidence effect takes place among the recruiters in our sample, as they conduct so many interviews on a weekly basis that they can become overconfident in their ‘fingerspitzengefühl’, which is the German equivalent of gut feeling. Hence, we question if the recruiters indeed are accurate spotters of biases or if they are simply blinded by their overconfidence.

Even though we are sceptical about the recruiter's ability to spot distortion caused by biases, we also argue that a random sample of Michael Page recruiters includes a relatively high number of deception wizards; because, as aforementioned, Michael Page is known for its competitive culture and high turnover rate, which effectively gets rid of unsuccessful recruiters and bad spotters of distortion. This elimination of bad spotters in the lower ranks of Michael Page results in a positive correlation between experience and the ability to spot

biases, as only the accurate spotters of biases can survive years of competitive culture and obtain more experience. This correlation is contradictory to the findings of Roulin, Bangerter and Levashina (2015) who argue that there is no correlation between experience and the ability to effectively perceive distortion caused by biases. Therefore, we challenge the lack of correlation between experience and the ability to spot biases, instead we argue for a lack of causal relationship between the two, as the culture of Michael Page disallows for bad spotters of distortion to gain experience.

#### 5.1.4 Limited Self Reflection

In our interviews we find that all the recruiters recognize the distortion caused by biases inflicted by the candidates, yet only a few recruiters realize that they also inflict distortion themselves. Nevertheless, our analysis shows that much of the distortion present in the interviews is caused by recruiter inflicted biases. One example of recruiter inflicted distortion is a recruiter stressing the importance of the first handshake with the candidate, this small first moment of the interview has a great impact in the final assessment of the candidate. Whereas the recruiter perceived a firm handshake as the introduction of a qualified candidate, a weak handshake is an indication of an incapable candidate. This is a textbook example of the anchoring bias, a common human proneness to focus heavily on the information that is gathered in first impressions, and thus predisposes the observer based on the first impression (Englich, 2016; Furnham & Boo, 2011).

One of the places where this limited self reflection can be observed is the way in which Michael Page allocates clients and candidates to the recruiters. This allocation takes place according to zip codes to ensure logistical efficiency, as the recruiter is able to visit more clients in less time and additionally offer his or her candidates a position close to their home. When we suggested to assign candidates according to demographics instead, in accordance to research by Macan (2009) who argues that recruiters may be biased to select same-race candidates, only a few recruiters recognized the possible advantages of it, leading us to realize that they are unaware of the impact of demographic trends.



Other recruiter inflicted biases, such as the overconfidence effect, enjoy more recognition by professional recruiters. Some recruiters were, for example, very reflective about their own overconfidence as stated that sometimes they rely too much on their gut feeling. We believe that this excessive reliance on gut feeling is a result of Michael Page's stance towards decisions based on gut feeling; Michael Page gives their recruiters a lot of freedom to make their own decisions and only interferes with the recruiter's decision making when these decisions are not profitable. This freedom to make decisions is in line with the works of Alvesson (2004) who states that knowledge work involves a high degree of self-determination; we thus recognize that knowledge work and the risk of overconfidence go hand in hand. Hence, our argument is that the acceptance of gut feeling based decisions fuels the presence of the overconfidence effect, since the recruiters do not have to justify every decision and can claim it to be gut feeling. We also find evidence of recruiters recognizing the impact of distortion caused by the halo bias as they state to base their decision too much on an overall good impression of the candidate. For instance, some recruiters admit to sometimes guide their decision making on good appearance, and thus were more forgiving towards negative information as they had an overall good feeling of the candidate. This is in line with to works of Rosenzweig (2014), Nisbett and Wilson (1977) who claim that observers may neglect vital negative information by focusing on an overall positive impression of the candidate. Nevertheless, the distortion caused by overconfidence effect and halo bias is less acknowledged by the recruiters than the candidate inflicted biases. This difference in acknowledgement between biases inflicted by either candidate or recruiter can be explained by the limited self reflection recruiters have; after all, it is easier to spot the speck in another man's eye than the beam in your own eye.

## 5.2 Handling Distortion Caused by Biases

### 5.2.1 Limited Explicit Guidelines

One of the most interesting findings from our interviews was that every professional recruiter has their own way of handling biases to decrease distortion given that Michael Page only offers a limited amount of explicit guidance, such as an interview guide. Not surprisingly, this interview guide fails to explicitly teach the new recruiters how to handle biases to decrease distortion as this requires a lot of tacit knowledge and gut feeling.

The logic result of this lack of firm wide coordinated training leads to professional recruiters obtaining knowledge and practice elsewhere. The first place new recruiters acquire knowledge outside of the provided explicit knowledge, is internal tacit knowledge; for instance, new hires join experienced recruiters in job interviews and can assimilate the embained ‘fingerspitzengefühl’ that these veteran recruiters have perfected over the years. This practice fits in the SECI model by Nonaka, Toyama and Konno (2000), where the authors explain that ‘socialization’ is the first stage to transferring tacit knowledge between individuals; this stage is characterized by sharing experiences, observing, and imitating. We argue that this tacit source of knowledge is the most prominent source where recruiters learn how to handle biases to decrease distortion. We furthermore argue that new recruiters focus on copying successful strategies of interviewing in general and thereby tacitly pick up successful strategies to handle distortion caused by biases.

Recruiters also get inspiration to handle biases and dishonest answers from both popular media such as movies as well as from everyday social interactions. For instance, one recruiter admits to have learned that starting the interview with questions of which he already knew the answers, helps him to calibrate to the body language and tone of voice of the candidate when answering honestly; to elaborate, this calibration prepares the recruiter to spot a change in behaviour that could indicate a dishonest answer. Interestingly, this specific example was

copied from a Hollywood movie involving criminal investigations, which is an unorthodox source, yet it proves to be effective. Another example is a recruiter who goes to coffee shop to speculate the continuation of interactions among strangers. By speculating, recruiters are able to practice the recognition of nonverbal communication, which augments their skills set towards better handling biases to decrease distortion.

When we analyse our findings, we observe that the limited explicit guidance provided is not the only reason that motivates recruiters to obtain knowledge outside of the organization. We also argue that this is fuelled by the the nature of the recruitment profession, which paradoxically is not considered a profession by most standards (O'Mahoney, 2010), and heavily depend on embrained knowledge and expertise of the individual (Alvesson & Johansson, 2001). As professional recruiter is not considered a profession, there is no specifically required university degree or certification that bestow the title of 'professional recruiter'. This lack of accreditation is reflected by Michael Page's hiring requirements for recruiters, which do not require more than a Bachelor degree. These mediocre requirements accommodate a very diverse group of recruiters that all have their own perspective; this, however brings along more challenges which are displayed in the following paragraphs.

### 5.2.2 No 'One Size Fits All'

Not only does every recruiter have their own way of handling the distortion caused by biases but most recruiters we interviewed agreed that every interview is a unique interaction; subsequently they adapt their style of handling biases to decrease distortion with each individual candidate. Most recruiters also agree that the interview does not depend on an individual ingredient but instead argue that it takes a combination of various factors to create a successful interview. This argument is in concert with studies of Breaugh (2013) and Cable (2013) who argue that many elements have an impact on the overall assessing, interviewing and recruiting of ideal candidates.

The recruiters use a basic and standardized template to ensure that no important questions are left out, but thereafter the recruiters are free to personalize the interview by adding their own questions and merely use the template as a backbone during the interviews. The freedom to detour from the template ensures a dynamic flow in the interviews rather than a static question-answer interview. This is in line with the work of Lievens and De Paepe (2004) that explains that most HR professionals use interviews with a moderate degree of structure. The effectiveness of a well designed interview structure is backed up by Van Iddekinge, Raymark and Roth (2005) who agree that well designed interviews display a higher evidence of validity. Levashina and Campion (2006), on the other hand, argue that although the structure provides less opportunity for intentional distortion, it might increase faking. Hence, a structured interview helps, but we argue that if managed poorly it can do more damage than good. We therefore support the usage of well designed semi structured interviews, which is found to be ideal as mentioned in the empirical findings.

### 5.2.3 The Right Balance

Even though there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution to decrease distortion, we find certain various strategies are used by multiple recruiters. The foremost example of a popular strategy is creating a friendly atmosphere by starting off with ‘small talk’; this strategy is backed up by both Chapman et al. (2005) as well as Klotz et al. (2013) who argue that candidates are more open with recruiters who come across as more personable. Interestingly enough, some recruiters felt that being too friendly could be counterproductive as this friendliness could come across as fake and create mistrust; after all, most candidates are intelligent knowledge workers who can sense false friendliness. We therefore argue for a balance between professionalism and friendliness rather than trying to be as friendly as possible. The recruiters in our case study furthermore explained that starting the interview with small talk lowered the stress level of the candidates who subsequently provided more accurate answers. This finding can be backed up with the research of Finnerty et al. (2016) who claim that although stress is unavoidable it can be lessened.

Some recruiters, however, did not try to decrease the stress level during the interview, instead they increase the stress in order to throw the candidate off; for example, one recruiter explains that candidates often rehearse standard interview questions such as salary, strengths and weaknesses and motivation to change; hence, to decrease the distortion caused by prefabricated answers, the recruiter asks the candidate if they could switch to a foreign language in order to check the language skills of the candidate. As few candidates prepare these questions in a foreign language they cannot simply blur out a prepared answer, instead the candidate has to answer instantly, which the recruiter found to be a more accurate reflection of the truth.

This technique augments research by Roulin, Bangerter and Levashina (2015) who suggest that using methods such as speech disturbances and purposeful response intermission can enable the detection of deceptive tactics used by candidates. Just as we argue that being too friendly can be counterproductive we also propose that decreasing the stress is not always productive. Hence, we argue for a balance between decreasing and increasing stress. Additionally, we see that the right balance is highly dependent on the specific interview as interviews are highly contextual, some candidates are naturally prone to stress and require the recruiter to decrease the stress in order for them to give an accurate answer, whereas other candidates are used to stressful situations and may use this familiarity to exercise deceptive impression management techniques; these latter candidates thus require the recruiter to increase the stress in order for them to give an accurate answer.

#### 5.2.4 Traits Rather Than Training

It is not just the diversity of candidates that require a customized interview, also the heterogeneity of recruiters make a ‘one size fits all’ solution impossible. Recruiters are inherently different; some are genuinely friendly while others are more suited for a ‘bad cop’ role. However, we have found that it takes a genuine curiosity about other people to be a great recruiter, as this curiosity helps to minimize the distortion caused by candidate inflicted biases in interviews. This finding came from answers provided by recruiters, but also from our

interaction with the recruiters where we noted that most of them were genuinely interested in people; more specifically, all the senior recruiters came across as very people oriented. This finding is in line with Roulin (2016) who states that it takes an intrinsic curiosity about others and the trait of social sensibility to be effective in detecting distortion caused by biases and to be able to enhance the results of an employment interview. We therefore argue that training helps to improve interviewing skills, but that great recruiters possess pre existing character traits.

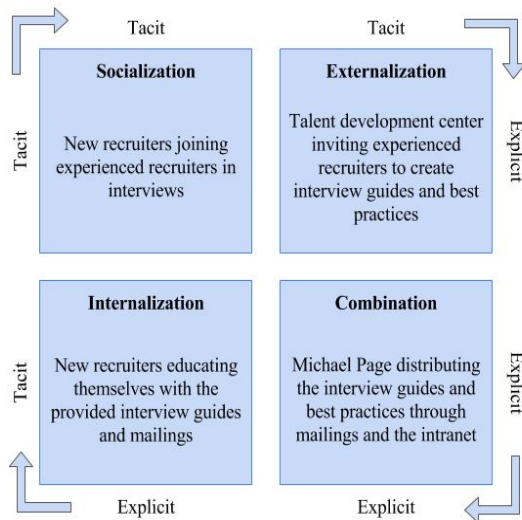
### 5.3 Knowledge Management and Innovation in a Recruitment Firm

Even though Michael Page has a highly competitive hierarchical pyramid where the less successful recruiters are expected to leave the firm, ultimately Michael Page benefits from the success of their employee. Along these lines, knowledge is arguably the most valuable resource they can provide, as the company fits the criteria of a knowledge intensive firm as explained by Alvesson (2004) and Newell et al. (2009). More precisely, Michael Page should focus on transferring individual heterogeneous knowledge from successful recruiters to their new hires; however, as supported by Nonaka, Toyama and Konno (2000) it can take a considerable amount of effort and time to create transferable knowledge.

When we look closer at the knowledge used by recruiters, we find that a slight majority of this knowledge is explicit and homogeneous, whereas the remainder of the knowledge remains tacit and heterogeneous. An example of an explicit strategy that is adopted by most recruiters is creating a confidential atmosphere as found in the interview guide provided by Michael Page. Other strategies, such as increasing the stress, require a high amount of tacit knowledge and are only practiced on an individual level; thus, Michael Page supports the transfer of successful practices through socialization by allowing new hires to join experienced recruiters in interviews. Additionally, the firm has a worldwide centralized talent development centre where the best recruiters from each country come together to create best practice; this reflects

a clear image of the externalization dimension of the SECI model (Nonaka, Toyama & Konno, 2000).

We argue that the combination of the high amount of tacit knowledge, the competitive culture and the talent development centre creates the perfect habitat for the creation and innovation of knowledge. Michael Page gives the recruiters a lot of freedom to experiment with different strategies and the only real border set by the company concerns the ethicality and legality of these strategies. The importance of this freedom is also recognized by Newell et al. (2009), Nonaka and Konno (1998) who stress that managers, rather than focusing on direct control, need to enable a context that supports the sharing and creation of knowledge. The strategies that are developed in this freedom are continuously tested by the competitive culture, that only allows profitable and thus effective strategies to remain at the firm. Furthermore, the most successful recruiters get invited to the talent development centre where Michael Page tries to externalize these heterogeneous and effective strategies into explicit information; thereafter Michael Page distributes this explicit knowledge among its employees through mailings and the creation of new interview guides, this in line with the combination dimension of the SECI model (Nonaka, Toyama & Konno, 2000). On its turn, the new recruiters internalize the information of both the interview guides as well as the mailings. Additionally, the successful recruiters invite the new recruiters with into the interview to transfer this tacit knowledge via socialization, which goes along with Nonaka and Konno (1998) who explain the nature of 'ba' and the importance of sharing a place for knowledge transfer. Subsequently, these new recruiters experiment with these successful strategies and start the spiral of the SECI model (Nonaka, Toyama & Konno, 2000) all over again as illustrated in the following figure.



SECI model (Nonaka, Toyama & Konno, 2000)

The realisation that Michael Page tries to foster a perfect habitat for the creation and innovation of knowledge is contrary to the expectations we held before the interviews. Whereas we thought that a recruitment firm mostly practices routine jobs, we were surprised to find the extent of tacit knowledge that recruiters employ on a daily basis. We furthermore recognize that this tacit knowledge is what holds Michael Page's competitive advantage, which is in line with the works of Alvesson (2004) who states that knowledge is built into an organization's culture and can provide the company with a competitive advantage, yet this is not easily achieved.





## 6 Conclusion

The research conducted in this thesis aimed to explore and describe how professional recruiters perceive and handle distortion caused by biases in employment interviews. Here we summarize the main findings of our case study at Michael Page and address theoretical and practical implications produced by our analysis. Lastly, we display the limitations of our study and recommend topics for further research.

### 6.1 Main findings

#### 6.1.1 Recruiters Are Confident Yet Lack Self Reflection

The recruiters in our sample came across as very confident in their ability to spot candidate inflicted biases which lead to distortion; sometimes to a point where they showcased their perception to be enlightened, as they accept the fact that biases will always be present when interviewing a candidate. This bloated confidence highly contrasts the acknowledgement of the distortion from recruiter inflicted biases; although every recruiter had an example ready about candidate inflicted biases, few recruiters could illustrate an example of the biases on their own end; this is an indication that the recruiter's self reflection to acknowledge self inflicted biases greatly lacks behind the recruiter's confidence in their ability to spot candidate inflicted biases in interviews.

#### 6.1.2 Perception Guided by Gut Feeling and 'Fingerspitzengefühl'

As for the handling of distortion caused by biases in interviews, this thesis has illustrated that our sample of recruiters possesses a great amount of tacit knowledge that guides their handling of biases do decrease distortion. As with most tacit knowledge this know-how is

hard to transfer between recruiters; accordingly, our research has proved that it is almost impossible to teach someone how to effectively handle the distortion caused by biases in interviews. It can be stated that great recruiters and effective handlers of biases are therefore not trained, it rather takes genuinely curious people with natural gut feeling to be able to discern the truth behind the candidate's answers. This ability, self-evidently, improves with continual practice and from socialization with other successful recruiters.

### 6.1.3 No 'One Size Fits All'

Our research has also illustrated that there is not one way that effectively minimizes all distortion caused by biases in interviews. The reason for this inconvenience is not only the amount of tacit knowledge involved in effectively handling biases or the diversity of the candidates, but also the heterogeneity of the recruiters necessitates a unique solution for each single interview. There are, however, certain basic aspects of the interview that can be standardized in order to minimize the distortion of biases to a certain extent. The main variable of the interview that should be in place is a structure that allows for a truly selective and robust interview. Another variable that should be present in every interview, is a start with informal 'small talk' in order to lower the stress of the candidate and allow for genuine connection between both recruiter and candidate.

### 6.1.4 Research Answer

Concluding, our research question is addressed:

*'How do professional recruiters perceive and handle the distortion caused by biases in employment interviews?'*

Our study suggest that professional recruiters are keen to perceive distortion inflicted by the candidate yet have limited awareness of the distortion inflicted by themselves. Moreover,

many practices and behaviours are adopted by the recruiters to perceive and handle the distortion caused by biases. Interestingly, these practices and behaviours to perceive and handle biases are to a substantial extent individual and tacit; this is well recognized by upper management who go to great lengths to capture this individual tacit knowledge and turn it into explicit knowledge that can be distributed across the organization. Hence, upper management at Michael Page facilitates and fosters an innovative environment to remain competitive in the market by tapping into the value of knowledge and knowledge management.

## 6.2 Theoretical Contributions

In this section, we first discuss which research is supported with our findings; and secondly, we offer the new insights that our research has produced. However, as our research is contextual and exploratory in nature, we abstain to present these new insights as universal truths.

Although more experienced recruiters are seen as more successful spotters and handlers of the distortion caused by biases, we find that this is merely the result of the unsuccessful recruiters leaving the competitive ‘up or out’ culture at Michael Page. There is thus no causal relationship between experience and the ability to spot biases which supports the findings of Roulin, Bangenter and Levashina (2015). Our study also shows that a friendly atmosphere in the interviews created by, for example, informal ‘small talk’ is perceived to decrease the stress level of the candidate and allow the candidate to open up more in the interview; this finding endorses research conducted by Chapman et al. (2005) and Klotz et al. (2013) who argue that candidates are more open with recruiters that come across as more personable. Our thesis also shows that recruiters who are genuinely interested in other people can decrease the distortion caused by biases in interviews, this finding augments the studies by Roulin (2016) who states that it takes people with an intrinsic curiosity for others to be effective in detecting biases and to be able to enhance the results of an employment interview.

The findings of this research have also provided new insights. For instance, our sample has shown that recruiters are not only aware of candidate inflicted biases in interviews, but it has also shown that they expect and accept a certain extent of distortion caused by biases without discrediting the candidate. Even though, in the previous paragraph, our findings support the research conducted by Chapman et al. (2005) and Klotz et al. (2013) by arguing for a friendly interviewing environment, we also found that trying to be too friendly in the interviews can be counterproductive, for the candidates can feel as if the recruiter is simply exercising a strategy rather than being genuinely interested, which causes mistrust from the candidate. We moreover discovered from our interviews that every professional recruiter has a heterogeneous and varying manner of handling the distortion caused by biases in interviews. Furthermore, our findings pose that recruiters have very limited awareness of the biases inflicted by themselves.

### 6.3 Practical Applications

After conducting this study, we can suggest that focus should be placed on hiring people with the right character traits rather than spending resources on teaching these traits. Similarly, hiring people with characteristics such as being genuinely curious about people is a step closer to hiring the more qualified recruiters. Along the same lines, we have recognized that good recruiters can be trained and taught; whereas great recruiters cannot be trained, as much of this depends on traits that are not easily transferable including background and specific cognitive abilities that take specific life experiences to develop.

It can be established that for an interview to have decreased levels of distortion, a friendly and conversational atmosphere is required, and it should divest from a rigid interviewing atmosphere as this is proven to cause stress. Similarly, a good balance between professionalism and friendliness should take place in interviews, though the degree of each is highly context dependant.

Lastly, we realize that the practices and behaviours of the recruiter profession is substantially tacit, which in turn, leads to innovation when managed properly. Thus we argue that this should be fostered as tacit knowledge is the root of innovation which is essential to remaining competitive in the market. Moreover, our case study demonstrated that measuring performance and similarly facilitating a competitive environment also ignites the professional recruiters to innovate.

## 6.4 Limitations

As no research is perfect, we acknowledge that this thesis comes with its limitations. This research was conducted for a master's degree, thus some of the main limitations we faced were the time and length we were required to abide by. Another limitation concerns the single case study design which prevents extrapolation across employment interviews worldwide.

## 6.5 Recommendations for further research

During our research we found several related questions that fell outside the scope of this thesis or were triggered by it. We argue that it is of interest to find out to what extent the practices and behaviours of handling biases in interviews is externalized at the recruitment firm.

An interesting research avenue to explore regards the correlation between the experience of the recruiter and the ability to recognize and adequately handle the distortion caused by biases in interviews, because of the conflicting findings between our interviews and the research conducted by Roulin, Bangerter and Levashina (2015), thus we expect that a quantitative study conducted in a real life setting with experienced knowledge workers will yield interesting results.

Another path for further research that will yield interesting results considers the difference in the amount of distortion in employment interviews across industries, as we found indications that candidates in certain industries employ more impression management techniques than in other industries. Moreover, there are authors that speak of ‘deception wizards’, yet there only exists a vague description of what makes up a ‘deception wizard’; thus researching this will prove to be quite valuable for recruitment and selection of human capital.

Finally, we challenge future researchers to investigate whether the interview is the most reliable element of the hiring process as we found that the face to face nature of the employment interview permits for biases to occur. Furthermore, there exists literature arguing the possibility of surveys and assessments being more reliable than employment interviews, thus this is an interesting area to further investigate and solidify.

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