Part I

Western Europe
How Innovative Staffing Solutions Can Make a Difference: The Case of Selecting Blue-Collar Workers for the Port of Antwerp

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Organizational Setting

Thanks to its central location and its large storage and distribution capacity, the Port of Antwerp, which is situated in the north of Belgium, can be regarded as a key gateway to Europe. Concerning international maritime transport, Antwerp is ranked as the second harbor of Europe and the seventh harbor worldwide. The Port of Antwerp is the European market leader in terms of the transportation of steel, fruit, forest products, coffee, tobacco, and other products. In 2009, it dealt with almost 160 million tons of goods. Each year, more than 14,000 seagoing vessels and 55,000 inland navigation vessels pass through the Port of Antwerp. As nearly every important European consumption and production center can be easily reached by train, vessel, or truck from the Port of Antwerp, it is considered to be a crucial player in the business of international trade.

Since the first Belgian social laws were voted in 1887, there has existed a growing necessity for Antwerp harbor employers and employees to gather in occupational associations to facilitate the social bargaining process. The harbor employees joined trade unions that acted on their members’ behalf during collective bargaining and social conflicts. Nowadays, every blue-collar harbor worker in the Port of Antwerp is obliged to become a union member, as members are not only represented during the social debate but benefit during the selection process and the employment phase in the port. The selection process consists of a sequence of tests and interviews one has to pass to become a blue-collar harbor worker. However, passing the tests is insufficient to be employed in the port: Each harbor employee also needs to be handed a registration card, which grants the owner the official right to perform harbor labor. Applicants interested in the job of harbor employee in the Port of Antwerp gain from their union membership, as trade unions control the sequence in which all applicants can participate in the employee
selection process of the port. Furthermore, the registration cards necessary to perform a blue-collar harbor job are provided only by trade unions.

In a similar vein, the employers of the port of Antwerp joined an employers’ federation, the Center of Employers at the Port of Antwerp (CEPA), which was founded on March 22, 1929. The CEPA’s main purpose was to optimize the organization of the harbor labor. Each employer in the Port was obliged to become a CEPA member and to pay a yearly contribution to the organization. In turn, the CEPA provided its members with, among others, a social administration service, a medical service organization, a training center, and a compensation fund. This fund was created to pay the wages of the blue-collar workers in case of economical or technical unemployment.

Until now, the responsibilities of the CEPA have been threefold. Most important, the CEPA represents all harbor employers during the social bargaining process and during social conflicts. Second, the CEPA is held responsible for the organization and administration concerning the selection and wage payment of all 9,300 Antwerp blue-collar dockworkers. The third task of the CEPA as an umbrella organization is the daily management of the aforementioned service organizations.

HRM in Belgium: A Culture of Compromise

As the Belgian culture is an essential determinant of the HRM processes in Belgium, it is important to describe the broader cultural context (Sels et al., 2000). However, answering this question is not simple, as a united Belgian culture is almost nonexistent. King Albert I saw himself confronted with the same observation in 1911 when one of his senators notified: “Sire, il n’y pas de Belges!” (“Sire, there are no Belgians!” Sels et al., 2000: p.21). Rather than by uniformity, the country is characterized by numerous contrasts. Examples are ideological (Catholic versus liberal), linguistic (French versus Flemish), and economic (labor versus capital) discrepancies.

These opposites, together with the shared Belgian history—rather than the shared Belgian culture—have molded the current relationships between employers and employees. The Catholic influences and Belgium’s pioneer contribution to the Second Industrial Revolution and its inherent social conflicts have substantially influenced the formal employment agreement and the psychological contract between employers and employees. Individual employment agreements are considered as membership certificates with limited room for negotiation. Therefore, most Belgian employees—especially blue-collar workers—have joined trade unions, and changes in employment conditions have been realized by collective bargaining. The long Belgian tradition of social negotiation and collective bargaining was created and is currently fostered by the psychological contract between employers and employees and the accompanying cultural values.
Nowadays, Belgian psychological contracts are characterized by high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance and, as a consequence, also high loyalty and low exit intentions (Hofstede, 1980). In practice, this implies that Belgian employees highly respect their employers’ authority (power distance). However, as a return, they count on their supervisors to meet their expectations, which primarily deal with labor conditions and job security (uncertainty avoidance) and are subject to collective bargaining. As both employers and employees place great value on the continuity of the production process, job security, social peace, and good quality long-term relationships, they constantly strive to reach a compromise during the negotiations. As the aforementioned Belgian contrasts have continuously threatened the harmony and social peace, the Belgian culture of compromise and consensus became a strategy to survive: And this includes the domain of HRM. Therefore, addressing and informing unions, inviting them as a partner in the collective bargaining process, and maintaining good union relationships are inherent parts of the management tasks of Belgian employers.

The Port of Antwerp: Toward an Innovative Selection Approach

Problems and Challenges in the Port

From the 1990s until October 2004, the CEPA outsourced the entire selection process for blue-collar harbor workers to a government-owned selection company. External consultants were responsible for the acquisition of the test battery, which consisted of an interview and numerous paper-and-pencil tests. The selection tests were rather old-fashioned, and no feedback reports were provided. The candidates were external applicants who attended the selection procedure of the Port of Antwerp with the aim to be selected for a job as dockworker. Twice a week, Tom Wolters, one of the consultants, visited the Port of Antwerp to communicate his decisions about the applicants and to provide face-to-face feedback when candidates explicitly requested it.

In light of this state of affairs, both the candidates applying for a job in the Port of Antwerp and the associated unions displayed an extremely negative attitude toward the selection procedure as it was organized in those days. The main critique expressed dealt with its troublesome job-relatedness, namely its perceived lack of a connection between the content and format of the selection methods used on the one hand and the target job on the other hand. This lack of a conceptual link between the selection procedure and the job led to reduced motivation on the part of the applicants because they perceived the result of the process as merely arbitrary instead of being based on a thorough assessment of their abilities. As the test battery was perceived to be an invalid predictor of job performance, the selection decision was also often challenged by candidates. Frequently, Mr. Wolters had to deal with complex and emotional feedback conversations with rejected candidates. These latter ones received full support of the trade unions,
whereby union representatives often attended the feedback meetings and criticized the entire selection process. At that point, any glimmer of constructiveness and effectiveness in the selection and feedback process of the Antwerp blue-collar harbor workers was a distant future.

In 2004, Sophie Ryan joined the CEPA as the new head of the selection department of the blue-collar harbor workers. In the past, she had been working as a consultant in the domain of personnel selection, which had made her aware of the importance of standardized, up-to-date, and valid selection procedures. Sophie’s assessment of the selection situation at the Port of Antwerp revealed that the CEPA was faced with multiple challenges. First, as the selection battery was questioned and criticized by applicants, harbor workers, and unions, the reputation of the CEPA selection procedure was in jeopardy. Second, the low motivation of the applicants often led to a decline in their test performance. The feedback meetings subsequent to the testing procedure were frustrating both for CEPA—which could not argue why certain candidates were not short-listed for the job as blue-collar dock workers—and for the candidates, who did not consider their testing results as a sufficient explanation for their rejection.

The traditional selection procedure also led to deterioration in the relationship between the harbor and the union. As the trade unions fundamentally disagreed on the use of the test battery, they displayed a rather inflexible attitude during numerous negotiations with the CEPA management, which slowed down the social bargaining process and complicated it significantly. Another difficulty inherent in the old selection procedure was that the test did not meet the changing nature of the job. In fact, the job demands had modified and increased over the years as a result of the changing legal and technological environment. Last, but not least, Sophie noticed that the current selection process was too stringent and demanding as the different selection instruments required a high level of literacy and language understanding (even though that was not needed for the job). This resulted in the wrongful rejection of many applicants and a limited applicant sample for a vacancy. Especially members of non-traditional applicant (ethnic minority) groups found it difficult to be selected as dock workers because of the high reading and writing demands of the test battery, irrespective of their technical skills. Thus, members of the minority applicant pool had significantly less chance to be selected than members of a majority applicant pool (Zedeck, 2009). This adverse impact raised ethical, deontological, and legal questions but also led to practical organizational problems such as the aforementioned shortfalls in applicant pools. This was especially important in times of increasing labor shortages on the one hand and growing globalization and international mobility of employers and employees on the other hand.

In short, Sophie concluded that the Port of Antwerp in general and the CEPA in particular were challenged to develop a new, job-related, and transparent selection process. First, the selection procedure had to predict the performance of the blue-collar harbor workers while taking the current job demands into account.
Second, it was supposed to elicit positive perceptions among applicants and trade unions, which in turn should improve the image of the Port and its relationships with the union. Third, it had to be an appealing selection procedure for traditional (majority) as well as non-traditional (minority) applicant groups.

The Switch

After careful consideration of the possible options, the chairman of the division, Sophie, and her staff decided to transform the current selection procedure entirely to meet the aforementioned challenges. The development of a novel selection test battery consisted of numerous steps. First, an extensive job analysis was conducted to determine the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs of each blue-collar employee profile. Therefore, interviews were undertaken with the head and the trainers of the training center, coworkers from the prevention and protection department, and trade union representatives. These job analyses resulted in an adaptation of the existing job profiles to the current needs of the harbor and a list of corresponding KSAOs per profile. The next step consisted of determining which selection procedures should be included in the selection process based on the KSAOs to be assessed. The CEPA’s aim was to shift from traditional test methods to a new test battery that consisted of computer-based tests and simulation exercises.

Figure 1.1  Screenshot of computerized crane operator simulation
To compose the selection battery, computerized tests used by other maritime organizations were purchased and supplemented with tailor-made computer exercises that were developed by an external consultancy firm. The former ones consisted of a 187-item personality questionnaire, an abstract cognitive reasoning test, and a speed-and-accuracy test. All exercises developed by the external consultancy firm used a visual presentation of the test content instead of a written presentation. Some exercises could be defined as simulation exercises or sample-based selection instruments as applicants were put in a simulated work situation and expected to realistically perform job-related tasks and solve problems.

Although most blue-collar dockworkers went through the same selection process, attention was also paid to the development of specific selection instruments for specific harbor worker profiles. The crane operator test, a simulation exercise that was developed to test applicants for the job of crane operator, serves as a good example. During this exercise, the candidate is placed in a simulated container crane on a harbor terminal and is subsequently asked to unload an inland navigation vessel. To do so, each candidate has a computer screen and two joysticks at his disposal, which serve to present the simulated situation and to carry out the accompanying tasks respectively. There are two tasks: First of all, the candidate needs to reach out for the container, and afterward he is expected to place the container on the dock. While performing this latter task, it is important that the applicant takes the position of other harbor container transporters into account and does not obstruct them in their movement. Figure 1.1 presents the reader with a screenshot of the crane operator test. The crane operator test measures four different KSAOs: concentration ability (speed-and-accuracy), sense of responsibility, sense of safety, and stress resilience. An important asset of this computer test is its ability to assess these KSAOs in an objective way. By using an automated scoring key that was developed in advance, the subjective element in the assessment process was reduced. Concentration ability was measured by the speed by which a candidate was able to work with the spreader (i.e., container lifting device). The hindering of other vehicles in the harbor served as a proxy for the candidate’s sense of responsibility. The applicant’s sense of safety was determined by the number of safety mistakes displayed during the test, for example, colliding with containers, ships, or other transport vehicles. Finally, stress resilience was measured by the candidate’s performance during test situations with increasing demands (e.g., via the manipulation of time limits). Since 2005, the crane operator test has been successfully used in the selection process of Antwerp crane operators.

An important aspect that Sophie took into account while modifying the selection process was improving and maintaining good long-term relationships between the CEPA and the trade unions. To develop a personal connection with the trade unions and to lower the communication threshold, Sophie decided to introduce herself personally to all harbor union representatives shortly after she joined the CEPA. To gain union commitment, Sophie presented the plans to adapt the CEPA selection system and discussed them with the unions already in the earliest stages.
of the switch. As mentioned earlier, the trade unions took part in developing
the new job profiles of blue-collar harbor workers. Although the unions were
strong advocates of changing the traditional testing method, the development of
a new test battery also induced a new perceived threat to a fair selection process.
As Sophie found out during her conversations with union representatives, they
feared that the PC-based nature of the battery required applicants to possess more
computer skills than needed for performing blue-collar worker jobs. Especially
older job applicants feared not being able to perform the tests properly and to be
selected out. Both Sophie and the external consultancy firm took this feedback
into account when developing the new selection battery. It was ensured that
neither computer skills nor a specialized educational background was required to
complete the selection instruments. Finally, to familiarize the unions with the new
selection procedure, trade union representatives were invited to pretest the new
computerized selection instruments.

In the end, not only the selection battery but the accompanying feedback process
was thoroughly adapted. As opposed to the early days, from 2004 every applicant
has been receiving a feedback report. In addition to this written report, each
candidate has been entitled to ask for a face-to-face feedback appointment and has
had the opportunity to look into his or her tests. Every rejected candidate also has
the right to sign up for a retest at an external selection office selected by CEPA.

The Current Situation at the Port of Antwerp

The switch from the traditional selection procedure to a modern, job-related, and
computerized version implied numerous direct and indirect advantages for the
Port of Antwerp. Logical consequences resulting from the computerized selection
procedure were faster and more efficient test administration, automatic item
banking, and up-to-date and automatically derived test norms. Apart from these
practical benefits, the use of fancy technological devices in selection also improved
the quality of the port’s selection process and the stakeholders’ perceptions of this
process (Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004), which all together led to substantial
image improvement of the Port of Antwerp and the CEPA.

One of the most important consequences of the renewed test battery is the
development of a job-related selection process for the blue-collar harbor workers.
As the test development was based on an extensive job analysis and made use
of practical and visual (simulation) exercises, the link between the selection
procedures and the job became evident. As researchers have demonstrated, this
job-relatedness or face validity of a selection instrument serves as an important
determinant of applicant test motivation and test performance (Chan & Schmitt,
1997). Accordingly, simultaneously with the switch toward the new selection
battery, Sophie noticed an increase in motivation at the applicant level. Hence, the
CEPA received considerably fewer complaints concerning the selection process,
which relates to the experienced image improvement of the port among applicants
and other stakeholders. In addition, the feedback meetings went more smoothly as the rejection of candidates could be objectively argued, thereby increasing feedback acceptance. Trade unions also notified the enhanced job-relatedness of the new testing battery and no longer criticized the selection process. This significantly improved the relationships between unions and the harbor management and facilitated the social bargaining process at the Port.

Another benefit of the selection procedure adaptation was its opportunity to take the altering needs at the Port of Antwerp into account. Owing to changes in the legal and technological harbor context, the job of blue-collar harbor worker faced increased demands concerning the KSAOs required. The modernization of the test procedure permitted Sophie and her staff to include these changed job demands when developing the new selection procedure, which resulted in a better assessment of the harbor worker’s abilities. This fits with one of the most important goals of the Port of Antwerp namely ensuring the quality of harbor labor and service.

A last important benefit of the renewed selection process in the Port of Antwerp is its reduced reading and writing demands and enhanced visual presentation of the stimulus material. By omitting unnecessary test demands (i.e., test demands that are not related to the job), the Port of Antwerp has nowadays the chance to enlarge its applicant pool by targeting non-traditional applicants groups.

**Conclusion**

This case exemplifies how HR has to invest in developing sophisticated and innovative solutions to tackle current selection challenges such as altering applicant perceptions, responding to changing work environments, improving the company image, and making the selection battery attractive for traditional and non-traditional applicant pools. At the same time, this case study demonstrates the importance for HR of taking its country’s cultural background into account while developing and implementing a solution. Accordingly, at the Port of Antwerp, the Belgian history of unionization and its culture of consensus significantly influenced the process of developing a new selection approach.

**Questions**

1. In what ways does the Port of Antwerp resemble or differ from your own national port or large organizations? Is the solution presented applicable in your country of origin?
2 Compare the Belgian unionization to the tradition of unionization in your own country. Which implications does this have for the development of staffing solutions in general and a new selection procedure in particular?

3 What other HR solutions can tackle the problems of the traditional port selection system?

4 Organize a group discussion about possible drawbacks of this new selection procedure. What are the challenges it might face in the future?

Note

The authors have permission to publish this case study and to make small factual changes. For privacy reasons, only fictional names were used.

References


