

# PREFERENCES IN RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION IN A SAMPLE OF AUSTRALIAN ORGANISATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The diversity of the Australian workforce has increased over the last 25 years, particularly with the increase in the number of migrants from South-east Asia. Despite the knowledge, skill and expertise that many of these immigrants possess prior to migrating, a high proportion of immigrants experience significant difficulties obtaining employment commensurate with their abilities. This paper is an exploratory study of the preferences of managers, recruitment specialists and migrants regarding recruitment and selection practices in selected Australian cities. Surprisingly, the findings revealed similarities between the three groups (managers, migrants and recruitment consultants). Thus, this study adds to the debate about the impact of cross-cultural expectations in recruitment and selection in Australian organisations.

**Keywords:** recruitment, selection, immigrants, Australia

## INTRODUCTION

Australia's population is one of the most culturally and linguistic diverse in the world, characterised by 160 different ethnic origins and more than 100 languages (Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills<sup>i</sup> 1995). In 2003, approximately one quarter of the population was born overseas, with 14% of people originating from a non-English speaking country. Through changing immigration policy, Australia's ethnic composition continues to change with the intake of more migrant and refugee groups. Over the next forty years, the proportion of Asian migrants is forecast to increase to a level of 7.5% of the total population (Department of Immigration & Multicultural Affairs<sup>ii</sup> 2003).

Of the 133,700 migrants arriving in Australia in 2001-2002, over half were in the workplace prior to migration, and 55% of all migrants were skilled (DIMA 2003). Data from the 1996 Australian census reveals that when compared to the whole Australian population, migrants from Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore have more educational or occupational qualifications. Over half of all migrants from these countries have tertiary level qualifications including a university degree or diploma and over 90% speak English very well, or well (DIMA 2000a).

Yet, it is commonly acknowledged that migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) have greater difficulty in obtaining employment than Australian born people (Barker 1994; Hawthorne 1992; Mak, Westwood & Ishiyama 1994; Yuen 1997). Migrants from an English speaking background do not experience similar difficulties, as they experience no

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greater difficulty than local Australians (DIMA 1999; Mak et al. 1994; Office of Multicultural Affairs 1993). As a result, NESB migrants are more likely to be unemployed, employed in positions which are not commensurate with their skills and qualifications, or face employment only within their own ethnic community (Barker 1994; Hawthorne 1992; Lever-Tracy, Kitay Phillips & Tracy 1991; Mak 1996; Mak et al. 1994; Yuen 1997). In a 1993 study of Chinese and Indian small business owners, Ip (1993) found that after migrating to Australia, less than half of these qualified participants were able to continue working within their previous field of employment. Non-recognition of overseas qualifications by employers and professional bodies, and employer resistance to hire these migrants, were identified as the primary obstacles. Additional causal factors affecting employment of NESB migrants include English language proficiency, migration status, and length of residence (Hawthorne 1992; Yuen 1997).

Associated with the changing Australian population, the composition of the workforce is becoming more diverse (Dessler, Griffiths, Lloyd-Walker & Williams 1999). Cope and Kalantzis (1997) promote using workforce diversity as an organisational resource. The successful management of diversity gives an organisation a competitive advantage in cost structures, decision making, creativity, problem solving and adapting to change (Cope & Kalantzis 1997; D'Netto & Sohal 1999; Mead 1998; Williams & O'Reilly 1990). Since nine out of ten of Australia's fastest growing export markets are non-English speaking, highlighting diversity and improving efficiency of management has sound economic reasons. The Karpin report (1995) and DIMA (2000b) propose that Australia's cultural diversity can be used to enhance economic performance, especially in relation to Asia, because business success in this region is associated with cultural sensitivity and market knowledge.

D'Netto and Sohal (1999) and Hay (1995) note that there is little evidence of Australian companies recognizing the potential in using their human resources to gain competitive advantage. Moreover, numerous studies have shown that although Australian managers have a growing awareness of diversity issues, managing a diverse workforce is not a priority (e.g. D'Netto & Sohal 1999; Erwee & Innes 1998; Fitzgerald 1997). Indeed, the research indicates that Australian employers are often unaware how to value the skills of overseas-trained applicants (Burton & Ryall 1995; National Multicultural Advisory Council 1995). Workers from non-English speaking backgrounds may offer four key assets to an organisation: language skills, knowledge of business networks, cultural sensitivity, and management knowledge (Karpin Report 1995).

There has been a significant amount of research examining what skills and qualities employers value most in job applicants (Dimmock, Breen & Walo 2003; Kretovics & McCambridge 1998; Mullen 1997; Yuen 1997). Qualifications, work experience and, communication/interpersonal skills are the most frequently identified qualities. Work experience and qualifications are measures of competence in relation to an applicant's technical skills, whereas the concept of communication skills appears to be a generic term incorporating many different specific skills. Indeed, communication in the workplace encompasses team skills; leadership skills; an ability to negotiate with/persuade others; problem solving skills; organisational skills; crisis management skills; and, presentation skills (Kretovics & McCambridge 1998). Other communication competencies include cultural adaptation, social competence and language proficiency (Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama & Barker 1999; Marx 1996 cited in Dowling, Welch & Schuler 1999). An applicant's success with job seeking is related to their ability to describe their experiences, skills and knowledge through a

range of media (Hawthorne 1992; Yuen 1997). Thus, effective communication is an essential competency required by all job applicants.

To manage a diverse workforce effectively, an organisation must hire and promote the most capable candidate for a job, while being mindful of the necessity to build a workforce that is representative of the greater business community. This may be achieved through using more appropriate and inclusive recruitment and selection strategies. Despite a recent increase in published literature discussing recruitment and selection practices, there has been little change in the types of methods used to recruit and select employees (Di Milia & Smith 1997; D'Netto & Sohal 1999; Huo, Huang & Napier 2002; Patrickson & Haydon 1988; Wood & Payne 1998; Yuen 1997). In Australia, written advertising is the most heavily used recruitment source, while face-to-face interviews continue to be the most frequently used selection technique (Bartol, Martin, Tein & Matthews 1998). However, as these practices are reliant upon an applicant's oral and written language competencies, several studies indicate that these are detrimental to a NESB migrant's success in gaining employment (Luvy-Leboyer 1994; Ryan, Mc Farland, Baron & Page 1999; Wood & Payne 1998).

Given the continuing difficulties faced by NESB migrants when seeking employment commensurate with their qualifications and experience, it is important to examine the recruitment and selection preferences of all parties involved in the selection interview. Numerous studies (e.g. Hawthorne 1992; Wooden, Holton, Hugo & Sloan 1994; Yuen 1997) have examined migrants' labour market participation from the viewpoint of either migrant applicants or job interviewers. Yet for a better understanding of the situation, it is necessary to examine the job-seeking experience from as many perspectives as possible. Thus, this research aims to identify managers', recruiters' and migrants' preferences in recruitment and selection in order to explain the difficulties NESB migrants experience in gaining employment commensurate with their abilities.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Participants were 41 managers, 10 recruitment consultants, and 12 migrants from South-east Asian countries.

#### *Managers*

The manager cohort in this study comprised forty-one managers enrolled in postgraduate studies at a Queensland university. A purposive sampling technique was used to find individuals with specific characteristics, traits and experiences. The majority of participants were aged 31 to 40 years (N=20), with 12 participants aged 25-30 years and nine managers were aged 41-50 years. Males made up a significant proportion of the sample, 82.9%, (N=34) with only seven female subjects identified. Most respondents were employed in middle management (N=25) with 12 respondents engaged in top management positions and four currently employed as first-line supervisors. There was equal distribution of managers born in Australia (N=20) and overseas. Participants were not excluded if they were born overseas, but were required to have lived and worked in Australia for a minimum of five years. Of those managers born overseas, 70% originated from a non-English speaking country (N=14). These countries include: India; Belgium; Zimbabwe; Italy; Malaysia; China; South Korea; Hong Kong; and, Japan. The English speaking countries were New Zealand and the United Kingdom. The distribution of respondents across industries was: Construction (N=2),

Finance (N=2), Health (N=5), Education (N=3), Retail (N=2), Hospitality (N=4), Sales/Marketing (N=7); Government (N=6); Manufacturing (N=4) and 'Other' (N=6). The reported 'other' industries include non-profit, transport and communications.

#### *Recruitment specialists*

Due to the increase in the outsourcing of HR activities such as recruitment and selection (Dessler et al. 1999), recruitment specialists from four recruitment agencies based in Adelaide, Melbourne and Brisbane participated in the study. Again, a purposive sampling technique was utilised. All of the agencies were representatives of large international recruitment consulting firms. The size of each firm in Australia ranged from 500 to 1600 full-time employees. In order to be selected for the sample, the specialists needed to be in positions where they were actively involved with recruitment and selection.

As part of this research study, ten recruitment consultants completed a survey that was distributed to them at their workplace. The researcher hand-delivered surveys to participants in Brisbane, and sent the survey via e-mail to participants in Melbourne and Adelaide. The ten participants (six females and four males) were distributed evenly amongst the age categories: three were aged 25-30; three were aged 31 to 40 years; and, four participants were aged 41-50 years. Most respondents were born in Australia (N=6), with the remainder born in the United Kingdom (N=2), South Africa (N=1), and Vietnam (N=1). While two participants had been involved with recruitment and selection for only two years, four participants had worked as recruitment and selection specialists for over ten years.

#### *Migrants*

Twelve individuals, six males and six females, who had migrated to Brisbane from a South-east Asian country, participated in a face-to-face interview. This sample was gathered using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Essential criteria for inclusion in the sample stated that participants were required to have lived in Australia for a minimum of two years, been speaking English for a minimum of two years, applied for a job and been employed in at least one position within Australia. Most participants were aged between 41 to 50 years (N=7), three were aged 25 to 30 years, two were aged between 20 and 24 years, and two were in the 31 to 40 years age group. The participants had migrated from four different South-east Asian countries, with most originating from Malaysia (N=6). Two participants came from each of the following countries: Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam. The mean length of time in Australia was 8.92 years, with a range of two to 26 years.

All participants were tertiary qualified with the highest levels attained including Diploma (N=2), Bachelor degree (N=7), Postgraduate diploma (N=2) and Masters degree (N=1). Over half of the respondents gained these qualifications in Australia (N=6). All participants have held at least one position within Australia, with respondents indicating that they have been employed in one job (N=5); two jobs (N=2); three jobs (N=3); five jobs (N=1), and one person indicated that she had been employed in eight different jobs.

### **QUESTIONNAIRE AND INTERVIEW**

The methodologies used in this study were questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire approach provided an efficient means to survey many managers within a limited amount of time and to access recruiters who were living in various cities around Australia. However, since English was not the first language of the migrant participants, interviews were chosen

because they offered a more effective method to exchange information in an intercultural communication setting.

In this study, respondents were presented with three questions. The first question asked participants to rank in order of priority the three most important factors they would consider essential in deciding to hire an applicant. The categories of responses provided to participants were: Work Experience, Qualifications, Communications Skills, Appearance, Additional Skills/Interests/Abilities, and Other. Secondly, participants were required to rank in order of priority their three most favoured recruitment processes. The categories were: Recruitment Agencies, Word of Mouth, Newspaper Advertisements, Internet, Advertising Through Professional Associations, and Other. The final question asked respondents to rank order their three most favoured selection processes. The categories of responses were: Face to Face Interviews, Written Applications, Recruitment Agencies, Telephone Screening, Job Network Members, Written Applications, Psychometric Tests, and Other. Results were obtained separately for each priority level. For example, when considering the most favoured recruitment method, the factor with the most number of '1' responses was identified as the most preferred technique. It is for this reason, that factors could be ranked as most important by some respondents, and third most important by others.

## RESULTS

### Factors influencing the decision to hire an applicant

As Table 1 shows, all participants rated Work Experience as the most important factor influencing the decision to hire an applicant. Across the three priorities, the managers and migrants most frequently reported Work Experience and Communication Skills as the most important factors. In contrast, recruiters rated Qualifications as most important. Almost one fifth of the managers ranked Communication Skills as either the second or third most important factor.

**Table 1: Respondents' perceptions of the most important factor to consider when deciding to hire an applicant**

Priority	Managers (N=41)	Recruiters (N=10)	Migrants (N=12)
1 <sup>st</sup> priority	Work Experience 33.3% (N=13)	Work Experience 60% (N=6)	Work Experience 41.7% (N=5) Qualifications 41.7% (N=5)
2 <sup>nd</sup> priority	Communication skills 30.8% (N=11)	Qualifications 30% (N=3)	Work Experience 41.7% (N=5)
3 <sup>rd</sup> priority	Communication skills 29.3% (N=12)	Work Experience 30% (N=3)	Communication skills 41.7% (N=5)

### The most favoured recruitment processes

As seen in Table 2, each group of respondents reported Newspaper Advertisements, Recruitment Agencies, and Word-of-mouth as being the most favoured recruitment processes. Two managers and one migrant noted other preferred methods of recruitment such as

examining internal reports, advertising on the World Wide Web, and advertising through professional associations.

**Table 2: Respondents' most favoured recruitment processes**

Priority	Managers (N=41)	Recruiters (N=10)	Migrants (N=12)
1 <sup>st</sup> priority	Newspaper Advertisements 43.93% (N=18)	Recruitment Agencies 40% (N=4)	Newspaper Advertisements 41.7% (N=5) Recruitment Agencies 41.7% (N=5)
2 <sup>nd</sup> priority	Word of mouth 35% (N=14)	Newspaper Advertisements 60% (N=6)	Newspaper Advertisements 41.7% (N=5) Recruitment Agencies 41.7% (N=5)
3 <sup>rd</sup> priority	Recruitment Agencies 31.6% (N=12)	Word of mouth 40% (N=4)	Word of mouth 50% (N=6)

### The most favoured selection processes

Table 3 shows that the managers and migrants indicated that Face-to-face Interviews, Written Applications and Recruitment Agencies were the most favoured selection processes across the three priorities. The recruiters did not indicate a strong preference for Written Applications. Rather, they favoured Telephone Screening, which was the third most frequently reported selection process.

**Table 3: Respondents' most favoured selection processes**

Priority	Managers (N=41)	Recruiters (N=10)	Migrants (N=12)
1 <sup>st</sup> priority	Face-to-face Interviews 65.9% (N=27)	Face-to-face Interviews 50% (N=5)	Face-to-face Interviews 66.7% (N=8)
2 <sup>nd</sup> priority	Written Application 48.8% (N=20)	Face-to-face Interviews 40% (N=4)	Written Application 33.3% (N=4)
3 <sup>rd</sup> priority	Recruitment Agencies 39% (N=16)	Telephone Screening 40% (N=4)	Recruitment Agencies 41.7% (N=5)

## DISCUSSION

### Participants' perceptions of the most important characteristics of applicants

When considering the most important characteristics an applicant should possess, there was considerable agreement between the migrants, managers and recruiters. Work experience, qualifications and communication skills were the most frequently reported factors by all participants in this study. This is consistent with other studies in this area, in which managers

identified job-related skills (work experience and qualifications), communication skills and personality characteristics to be the most important selection criteria (see Dimmock, Breen & Walo 2003; Kretovics & Mc Cambridge 1998).

Interestingly, although communication was rated by participants as the second or third most important factor, studies have demonstrated that language proficiency is not perceived by managers and recruiters as being as important as other work-related characteristics (e.g. Hawthorne 1992; Yuen 1997). As discussed earlier, different components of communication, such as language skills and interpersonal skills, have been identified as being desirable attributes in applicants. Consequently, further clarification is required to gain a deeper understanding of what the participants were referring to when they rated communication as an essential selection criterion.

In their study examining managers' and recruiters' definitions of 'good communication skills', Daly, Barker and Mc Carthy (2002) found that spoken language is the key communication competency in the context of recruitment and selection. Yet, proficiency with the English language does not equate to communicative competence. Indeed, Mak and her colleagues (1994) assert that the most significant barrier to Hong Kong immigrants gaining employment in Australia is reduced knowledge of the cultural code which, in turn, is conveyed through nonverbal communication. Studies focusing on other cultural backgrounds have presented similar evidence (e.g. Hawthorne 1992; Mak 1996; Yuen 1997). It is interesting to note that Daly and her colleagues (2000) found that managers and recruiters see issues regarding culture and communication as fundamental to NESB migrants' success in gaining employment in Australia.

### **Participants' most favoured recruitment processes**

Newspaper advertisements, recruitment agencies and word-of-mouth were the most favoured processes by participants in the present study. These results are similar to previous findings that have identified that newspaper advertising and recruitment agencies are the most effective methods of recruiting (see Bartol et al. 1998; Byrne 1990). Singh and Finn (2003) propose that advertising on the Internet should supplement conventional practices. Some participants also identified the need to extend advertising to incorporate broadcasting vacancies in professional association journals and on the Internet.

These findings confirm D'Netto and Sohal's (1999) position that managers and recruiters need to re-examine their recruitment processes so as to identify more effective ways to manage a diverse workforce. For several reasons, the current favoured practices of advertising in the newspaper and using recruitment agencies may fail to captivate the attention of NESB migrants. Migrants may not read 'mainstream' newspapers because of a preference to read ethnic newspapers, especially to maintain their cultural identity through continuing to read in their own language (Mak et al. 1999). In addition, migrants' written English skills may not be as developed as their oral language competencies. Thus, a recommended alternative recruitment strategy is advertising in publications read by migrants (Guy & Newman 1998).

Furthermore, migrants from South-east Asia may not perceive the strategy of approaching a recruitment agency as appropriate, since there is no obvious link between the agency and the organisation in which they seek employment. Members of collectivistic cultures value the sense of belonging to an organisation (Hofstede 1980). This may not be possible if the applicant must initially engage with a recruitment agency. Moreover, there may be a tendency

for migrants to prefer word-of-mouth as this permits relationships and trust to be established, which is a core theme in Asian cultures (Gundling 1999; Triandis 1990; Tyner 1998).

### **Participants' most favoured selection processes**

Participants indicated that the face-to-face interview was the most favoured selection process. Managers and migrants also favoured written applications. Numerous studies have shown that interviews and written applications are the two most commonly used selection methods in Australian organisations (Bartram, Lindley, Marshall & Foster 1995; Di Milia & Smith 1997).

According to Herriot (1989), the interview is the first stage of developing a relationship between the applicant and organisation. This viewpoint provides a possible explanation for the informality of interviews experienced by the migrant participants in Daly's (2000) study. In her study, the migrants' responses indicated that the job interviews that they had attended were casual and reflected a 'chat', with one interview conducted in the social situation of lunch in a café. This supports Carline's (1992) proposal that the final selection interview should be informal as it is an effective method of developing relationships and determining organisational acceptance of an applicant, rather than the typical interview.

While managers and migrants also favoured written applications and the use of recruitment agencies, it is intriguing that the recruiters indicated a preference for telephone screening over these two methods. Therefore, in outsourcing the selection processes, managers may be subjecting applicants to different decision making procedures than what would have occurred in-house (Atkinson 1999; Jeffay & Bohannon 1997). Furthermore, because the manager outsources these processes, they are losing control and the ability to make instinctive decisions about an applicant's suitability to the role and the organisation as whole and, in turn, for the applicant to judge their match to the organisation.

The managers and migrants prioritised the written application as the second most preferred selection device. Migrants may experience difficulties with writing job applications in response to newspaper advertisements (Daly 2000). Mak (1996) identifies that recruitment practices based upon written applications are disadvantageous to NESB migrants since oral language competence is required before the development of writing skills (Snow 1991). Participants in Daly's (2000) study reported that gaining assistance from friends, family and employment assistance is common practice. However, friends and family may not have inadequate literacy abilities, or a writing style suitable to the format of a written application (Kitson 1999).

When considering cultural differences and the roles these play in human resource management practices, it was anticipated that migrants' preferences in relation to recruitment and selection practices and the ideal characteristics in a job candidate would differ from those of the managers and recruiters. However surprisingly, the migrant participant group's responses were similar to the managers and recruiters. Therefore, it is important to examine this further to ascertain why NESB migrants continue to experience under-employment and unemployment in Australia. It is worth noting that communication, both oral and written, represent the most favoured recruitment and selection processes. Thus, unless they have a considerable level of communication competency with the English language, a NESB migrant's chance of being successful in job seeking is hampered.



In addition, South-east Asian migrants need to be aware that language proficiency without socio-cultural competence is unlikely to lead to success, particularly in interview settings. Since culture is expressed through nonverbal communication, an Asian migrant's success in a job interview may be significantly impaired because of intercultural differences (Mak 1996). Numerous studies have identified that using culturally appropriate nonverbal behaviours increases an applicant's ratings (Arvey & Campion 1982; Rasmussen Jr 1984). Thus, South-east Asian migrants seeking employment in Australia may be able to prepare for the recruitment and selection processes and be more successful through having a better understanding of what specific characteristics managers and recruiters are seeking in candidates. In this regard, socio-cultural competence training in behaviours relevant to the workplace such as participating actively in groups, expressing disagreement, or seeking information, would be beneficial (Mak et al. 1999). This has implications for the migrant service providers, and government and private employment agencies that assist migrants with gaining employment in Australia, as they need to re-examine the types of services available.

Furthermore, Daly et al. (2000) found that most managers and recruiters have a limited understanding of cross-cultural communication issues that may impact on recruitment and selection of NESB migrants. Several authors (e.g. Fitzgerald 1997; Karpin 1995) argue that managers and recruiters expect migrant applicants to have good communication skills, and they have little awareness of the potential limitations in their own cross-cultural communication abilities. Subsequently, there is a strong need for managers and recruiters to seek training in working effectively with clients and employees from diverse backgrounds. This may incorporate cultural awareness training, as increased knowledge of one's own culture can lead to greater awareness of cross-cultural issues and, thus, more effective management of clients and employees from diverse backgrounds.

The findings of this study are relevant to the educational facilities that are involved with training future managers and recruitment specialists. Given the changing composition of the Australian population and the increasing business operations in the global marketplace, Australian education institutions need to consider incorporating into the curriculum of tertiary qualifications, interpersonal skills training, with particular focus on intercultural communication, and basic issues related to diversity management.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has provided some insight into the issues surrounding recruitment and selection of a diverse workforce. However, it is acknowledged that the study has a number of limitations, including the small sample size. While it would have been ideal to survey a larger number of participants, it is conceded that this is a small study and, as such, is exploratory in nature. Additionally, the varying length of residence reported by the migrant participants may not be truly reflective of the impact of cultural differences on success with gaining employment.

Clearly, further investigation of NESB migrants' recruitment and selection experiences in Australia needs to be conducted. Examining the impact of socio-cultural competency training on employment outcomes with NESB migrants will provide support agencies with more accurate data about how to better assist migrants to gain employment and, more importantly, to gain career advancement. Moreover, there is a need for a benchmarking study on best practice in relation to cultural awareness and diversity management training of recruiters and managers.

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<sup>i</sup> Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills is also known as Karpin (1995)

<sup>ii</sup> Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs—DIMA