Application of Sustainability Questions to Job Interviews: Critical Analysis

In order to gather data about using job interview questions to integrate sustainability into the selection functions, recruiters were asked whether they applied this practice when conducting job interviews for positions that do not directly deal with functional sustainability tasks. If yes, follow-up questions were used to learn about the recruiters' motivation to perform their practice, how and how often they did it, and their evaluation about the practice's effectiveness. If the recruiters responded that they did not apply the practice, follow-up questions were asked to collect data about their reasoning and opinions on whether they want to try it in the future.

Among the 12 recruiters taking part in data collection phase, 8 of them responded that they asked specific questions about sustainability or sustainability-related practices to candidates during job interviews. Sustainability-related questions were said to be not always asked in a job interview, but they were included in the recruiters' job interview question list. Compared to including sustainability in job descriptions, adding sustainability dimensions in job interviews was considered to be easier and more flexible since the recruiters can direct the interview according to the flow and progress of the conversation without a standardized structured. The recruiters provided various examples of sustainability-related questions they used in job interviews. Remarkably, these examples are all situational-based or job knowledge questions. Examples of questions provided by the participants are summarized below.

Explicit questions, which directly express recruiter's interest in candidate's understanding, knowledge, and opinions about sustainability:

1. "What do you think about sustainability, which is a hot topic in the business world these days?"
2. "How do think about the impacts of sustainability on your job?"
3. "Considering you are responsible for a project to promote sustainability in your work of your team, what will you do if there are some resistance coming from your team member?"

Implicit questions, which do not directly mention sustainability but the ideal answers for them should embed sustainability-related information:

1. "How can you contribute to our company's value and vision?" and check if the candidate mentions company's sustainability practices, which is widely introduced in company's external media?
2. "How can this job strengthen your personal values?"
3. "How does your dream working environment look like?"
4. "What do you expect in our company when applied for this job, beside your personal desires (personal development, good salary, job security, etc.)?"

Pay attention to candidates' volunteer activities in applications and ask follow-up questions on this topic.

Regarding this practice's effectiveness, even though it can not be measured or tracked after the interview, recruiters had positive views that this practice contributed to the overall success of a job interview. Questions related to sustainability enable them to obtain more evidence about candidate's sustainability-related competencies, which include many important skills, and thus the selection decisions can be made with more confidence. Moreover, discussing sustainability in a face-to-face job interview was also considered to be able to avoid the ambiguity of the expression about sustainability in job descriptions. The 4 other recruiters who did not use sustainability-related questions when interviewing candidates reported that they either had time pressure, have not thought about it, or thought that it was unnecessary to do so because they assumed that the final selection decision was unlikely to be changed or impacted by the answers from candidates for sustainability questions. However, all these 4 recruiters thought that it would be beneficial to add sustainability questions into their question list because they are costless and cause no harm to the selection process. Therefore, they were also willing to test this practice in the future job interviews with positions that do not directly deal with sustainability.

There were new insights about how the recruiters view sustainability-related competencies as criteria during the selection process. The recruiters' points of view brought up the encouragement to apply the practice, but at the same time, they challenged the rationale reported by available studies behind the motivation of this practice. Therefore, in the result explanation, specific category was labeled according to the recruiters' points of view, instead of being named as "benefits" or "barriers".

1.1.1. Sustainability is related to many important competencies

According to the participants, the biggest advantage of adding sustainability questions to job interviews was that the topic of sustainability is closely connected to many important competencies that employers look for in candidates. In line with research (Coro Strandberg, 2015; Jepsen & Grob, 2015; Wiek et al., 2011; Bickell, 2013; Barth et al., 2007; Wehrmeyer, 1996), the recruiters recognized that there was a mutual relationship between the ability to deal with sustainability-related problems and many other skills, abilities, and knowledge such as leadership, strategic decision making, communication, empathy, et cetera. Sustainability-related questions were believed to be useful to assess both technical and behavioral competencies of a candidate.

1.1.1.1. Sustainability's relevance to technical competencies

In terms of technical competencies, as explained by the recruiters, taking sustainability as a non-expertise issue that candidate encounters could help to predict how he or she solves problems in real situations and develops new initiatives. For this type of competencies, explicit questions were reported to be used more than implicit ones. Candidate's answers for sustainability-related questions indicate how they exploit their expertise knowledge and skills to deal with factors that potentially influence their job performance, among those is sustainability.

In light of the fact that half of the studied companies have to deal with environmental regulations in their core business, technical competencies related to sustainability seem even more crucial. For the reason that the core business widely affected almost all the operations within their company, recruiters working in these companies shared that frequently, the knowledge and techniques to comply with sustainability laws, especially in environmental aspect, could have a

significant impact on the hiring decision. Technical competencies are required to not only successfully perform sustainability-related tasks, but also effectively collaborate with other departments or divisions. The following excerpts illustrate this.

'If I hire a staff for HR Department, I want to learn about his or her awareness of social aspects of sustainability, which are covered by our HR policies and duties. For example, abilities to recognize discrimination signals in a job description or develop work-life balance practices are also helpful to evaluate the candidate's HR knowledge". (Respondent no.3)

"GRI and ISO understandings are sometimes asked during our job interviews for marketing positions, as we usually use those standards to promote our compliance to the customers". (Respondent no.9)

1.1.1.2. Sustainability's relevance to behavioral competencies

At the same time, recruiters responded that asking about sustainability also brought the opportunities to gain more insights about candidate's behavioral competencies, especially for the purpose of assessing the candidate's culture fit and organizational adaptation. Since sustainability is a part of a company's missions and values, the recruiters shared that they wanted to learn about candidates' opinions and attitude towards this topic, so that they could assess candidate's contribution to the collective values of the company while working in an organization that was driven by a sustainability commitment. Regarding the observation that recruiters were generally positive about contributing to their company's sustainability initiatives, they also expected the same encouraging attitudes and awareness from potential employees, who could work and collaborate with the recruiters in the future. In a bigger context, recruiters believed that asking about sustainability could facilitate more insights about the value alignment between organization and individual since a positive attitude towards sustainability was seen to be closely related to the willingness to change, a can-do mindset or high emotional intelligence, thus, asking about sustainability was an alternative to approach candidate's self-concepts and active values.

In other cases, similar to how candidate's technical competencies could be accessed through sustainability-related questions, behavioral competencies could be derived from candidate's answer on how they deal with difficulties or problems caused by sustainability. Additionally, compared to technical competencies, behavioral competencies were said to be difficult to be accurately evaluated and challenging to be changed by training once a candidate becomes an employee. Hence, having sustainability as an option to approach the candidate's personalities, attitudes and soft skills was considered beneficial in respect of the development of the candidate in their job position.

"For any position, I think hiring the most matching person is always better than hiring the best person. Matching means a match with culture and with the development direction of the company […] For example, we respect the gender equality in our workplace and we look for that respect from our future employees. It is not good for both organizational culture and the candidate's own life when we collaborate in a mismatch connection". (Respondent no.1)

"We can train to improve a new employee's performance, but it is tough to change someone's mindset and self-concepts". (Respondent no.12)

1.1.2. Sustainability as a complementary criterion in selection

1.1.2.1. A “good to know” criterion

Using sustainability-related questions or not, the majority of the recruiters (90%) considered sustainability criterion only as “good to know” criteria during selection process. According to these recruiters, candidates who were passionate to act sustainably, had good knowledge about the topic, or often engaged in volunteer activities would have a certain advantage compared to other candidates, however, this advantage was not decisive for the final hiring decision. Other criteria such as education, working experience, culture fit, expertise and technical competencies directly related to the position and behavioral competencies beyond sustainability were the ones that mattered more when recruiters make hiring decisions. Taken together with the fact that none of the studied companies include sustainability-related information in their job descriptions, sustainability knowledge and attitudes were perceived only as a preferred qualification during the selection process. Recruiters believed that sustainability knowledge and attitudes could be trained to a certain extent after the employee joined the company. Therefore, it was more important to ensure that the candidate could adapt to the company’s culture and be competent enough to perform his or her main tasks first.

“For candidates who are potential in their expertise field but lack the knowledge of sustainability, our can show our support by giving them a chance to expand their knowledge and develop their sense about sustainability, rather than immediately reject them. This also shows how an organization can spread the positive message to unaware people”. (Respondent no.3)

“Of course being aware of sustainability is positive for a candidate, but it does not reflect so much about the performance result of the candidate. First and foremost, we need someone who can perform the duties well, then we will consider whether they are sustainable or not”. (Respondent no.5)

1.1.2.2. A reference to other criteria

Through explicit and implicit questions, sustainability could be used as a reference to access a candidate’s technical and behavioral competencies. Above all, and in line with results from previous studies, recruiters stated that key competencies in sustainability overlapped with many other crucial competencies that have already been defined and recognized by other criteria. According to Dessler (2002) and Otoo et al. (2018), besides qualifications and work experience, communication or interpersonal competencies are the most frequently required qualities. Whereas qualifications and work experiences are the main predictors for a candidate’s technical competencies, communication, and interpersonal competencies are a generic term referring to teamwork, leadership, negotiation, problem solving, presentation skills, and even social competence, cultural adaptation, and language proficiency. These skills and abilities cover most of the key competencies in sustainability as well, and it might seem unnecessary to create one more criterion only to assess sustainability competencies.

Therefore, this finding from this category suggests that sustainability-related questions can be helpful as one of the entry topics to approach candidates’ competencies rather than as a fixed criterion that always has to be asked during a job interview, except of course for positions in

sustainability field. In the end, the candidate's knowledge, awareness, or attitudes towards sustainability are not the final insights recruiters want to learn about, instead, they are seen as measurements of other criteria as well. Together with the recruiters' responses to use sustainability-related information mostly as an employer branding solution, this finding confirms that sustainability criterion was not as significant as the others in making hiring decisions.

1.2. The influence of the company's core business

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