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SEARCH FOR WORKERS AS SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION

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The labour market is seen as a field of symbolic exchange where the main actors are employers and job applicants, whereas the objects of exchange are workplaces and professional competence of employees. The analysis is based on the observed behavioural practices and verbal expressions. An attempt has been made to consider the area of interaction between employers and jobseekers as a field of symbolic production and consumption and to describe methods of construction and perception of representations in the labour market. The analysis of several interviews has revealed significant characteristics of the image of an employee, the employer's expectations and the specificity of perception of a job applicant.

Search and recruitment is a communication process which forms an image of the profession. The use of various search channels imposes restrictions on the construction of the image of a required worker by the employer and determines the specificity of perception of the vacancy by job applicants.

Keywords: symbolic construction, labour market, employers' requirements, channels of search for workers, communication.

ПОИСК РАБОТНИКОВ КАК ПРОЦЕСС СИМВОЛИЧЕСКОГО КОНСТРУИРОВАНИЯ

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Рынок труда рассматривается как поле символического обмена, где основными акторами являются работодатели и соискатели рабочих мест, а в

роли объектов обмена вступают рабочие места и профессиональные компетенции работников. Предпринята попытка, отталкиваясь от наблюдаемых поведенческих практик и вербальных высказываний, рассмотреть область взаимодействия работодателей и претендентов на рабочие места как поле символического производства и потребления, охарактеризовать способы конструирования и восприятия образов на рынке труда. На основе анализа серии интервью выявлены значимые характеристики образа работника, ожиданий работодателей и специфики восприятия соискателя рабочего места.

Ситуация поиска и найма работников представляет собой определенный коммуникационный процесс, формирующий образ профессии. Использование различных каналов поиска работников накладывает ограничения при конструировании образа востребованного работника работодателями и определяет специфику восприятия вакансии соискателями рабочих мест.

Ключевые слова: символическое конструирование, рынок труда, требования работодателей, каналы поиска работников, коммуникация.

The issues of consumption and consumer behavior often become the subject of sociological studies. However, most scientific researches and marketing practices are aimed at the study of the real, not symbolic consumption. They relate to the behavior of consumers in the markets of goods, but not in the labor market.

It seems fruitful to apply postmodernism theories to the labor market. Considering the area of interaction between the subjects of the labor market (employers and job applicants) as a field of symbolic exchange, one can expand understanding of the process of forming of the image of a profession and its perception in the labor market.

Source of Information

To identify employers' representations of the employee's qualities in order to analyse how the image of a profession is formed in the recruitment process, there was

conducted a case study of employers and mediators in the labor market¹. We used on-site data collection methods in the form of leitmotif interviews, which were focussed on a detailed description of specific cases (case study) and the reasons for employment/unemployment of job applicants.

The need for outspoken information predetermined use of convenience sample. So there have been collected materials of 15 cases. They study the behavior of employers and job applicants in the recruitment procedures. Among the surveyed enterprises there are: an international shipping company, a trading company in textile industry, an air company, engineering enterprises in designing and manufacturing of aircraft units, a furniture company, the largest enterprise in the Russian space industry, a company for the assembly of computer hardware, an appraisal company, a private security agency, a consulting center, recruitment agencies and a state employment service agency. We applied to intermediary organisations because the agencies that promote employment also have requirements for job applicants and therefore, form images of professions.

This article presents some observations on the peculiarities of forming the image of a profession in the process of search for workers.

Criteria for Assessing Applicants

Analysis of the interviews enables us to identify key competencies that, in employers' opinion, job applicants must possess. Let us try and describe the most common stereotypes of employers' representations of "a good" employee.

The image of a potential employee is created by the employer and the mediator in the labor market under the influence of many factors. It is a set of the employer's requirements for the employee. Among the criteria for assessing a worker there are requirements for the professionalism of a job applicant, which include the level of

¹ The study was supported by the Russian Foundation for Humanities (RFH) in the framework of the research project "Symbolic consumption in the labor market", grant No 10-03-00457a.

professional education, work experience, qualifications, further education, additional skills. Formal markers of these requirements are documents: diplomas, licenses, employment history, certificates, qualification certificates, etc. Undoubtedly, in the hierarchy of factors that influence the employer's decision professional competencies play the leading role: *"one needs professional skills because the employer in the first place is looking for a man who will do a certain job"* (Director of Recruitment Agency).

As a rule, professionalism is detailed in the discursive field of professional competencies within the designated profession: *"These are the skills that an employee has got, the ability to carry on negotiations and achieve a positive outcome - for a sales specialist, knowledge of accounting and law, distribution of financial flows- for a financial manager, and so on"* (Manager of Recruitment Agency).

Another attribute of professionalism is extensive use of available skills. In one case, a professional may be a specialist who has mastered some narrow competencies that are rare and unique, in another – it is a versatile worker with skills demanded in different industries. It generally refers to the competencies of senior management that do not necessarily imply thorough knowledge of business; technical skills in this case are not so badly demanded: *"A man might not have filled such a position, but we are willing to consider a person who is able to organize work, who is able to achieve the expected financial results"* (Head of Recruitment Agency).

Of obvious importance for employers are the documents that prove proficiency of the employee. For example, in shipping: *"there should be all papers. If all the papers are correct, it is important for the crewing and for all audit companies. If you do not have a set of documents, the crewing will not let you go on board the ship"* (Captain, Shipping Company), for security guard activities: *"the key to getting a job is a licence. This means not just a certificate but the fact that he has been trained"* (Commercial Director, Private Security Company).

However, documents in many cases must also be confirmed: either immediately at job placement or in the current process of certification. Though the

audit can be both official: *"in addition, there is also professional selection, for example, pilots are to answer about five hundred questions to be admitted"* (Director of Air Company) and informal: *"most companies have a kind of admission test. This very X-ray welding. He welded – he was admitted, not welded - not admitted"* (Head of Marketing Department, Consulting Center).

Note that employers often doubt the credibility of the applicants' documents: *"You can write anything you want and set a dozen of seals, and then you come on board the ship and do not know where the tank is, and where the poop is, how to address the captain, how - the boatswain"* (Captain, Shipping Company).

Most respondents use more specific concepts than the abstract category of professionalism. They consider decisive factors for employees to be experience and professional education: *"For us professionalism is in the first place. It implies experience and the level of training"* (Head of Active Sales Department, Trading Company). Among the criteria crucial for the employers to assess the professionalism of a prospective employee is ***experience***.

The analysis of the interviews has revealed semantic features of the concept "experience": employers speak either of the existing qualifications, skills and abilities, or of the time interval – length of service. However, it is not always important that experience should include professional skills - specific skills can be not so meaningful for the employer.

"What kind of experience? Well, any, not necessarily in sales. It just characterizes a person, that he did not sit at home pulling money out of the pockets of his parents. He is willing to make money, he communicated with people all the same, at least at some job" (Advisor to General Director, Machine-Building Enterprise).

For certain jobs the employer points to undesirability of experience in a similar job because it suggests that the applicant uses professional cliché patterns of corporate culture which are unacceptable for the organization: *"Experience may be not important because certain competencies, personal attributes will be taken as a basis, such as: the activity, responsibility, and people, to be trained for the*

organisation. They find it beneficial to take a person with no experience and train him in the company, because it means he takes the model adopted by the company as a principle" (Manager of Employment Agency).

Thus, for the employer the concept of experience has two connotations: experience- expertise and experience-qualification. In the first case, important characteristics are actual length of service, length of time, and discreteness. In the second one, the importance is given to qualifications, experience and its origins, depending on which company it was gained in.

Another criterion of professionalism in the employers' hierarchy is ***the level of professional education***. In almost every interview employers say that "a good", "an ideal" employee must have a university degree: "*Candidates with college education have not been considered*" (Head of Marketing Department, Consulting Center).

The employer indicates that a high educational level has an impact on the performance, as it indirectly influences not only the development of professional competencies, but also the culture and manners of the employee's behavior.

In the opinion of employers, higher education suggests the level of culture, education skills, communicative skills (ideas about proper behavior in certain situations, etc.), rather than professional skills and abilities. In these cases, the profile of the applicant's institution or his/her specialty are not significant: "*We have only a few employees with commercial education. Almost no one has special commercial education. It's rather difficult to speak about profile professional education in our company*" (HR Director, Furniture Company).

The need for appropriate professional education is noted by the recruitment agency staff. However, in these cases, specialized education is intended to provide effective communication, whereas professional knowledge proves to be not so important. Professional education requirements allow the employer to get an employee with appropriate vocabulary and communication skills in this sector.

Analyzing the employers' idea of a prestigious education, we tried to understand whether there is any difference in the representation of education gained

in different educational institutions (note that this refers only to higher education, institutions of secondary and initial vocational education were not considered by the employers in terms of prestige).

In rare cases, employers require a diploma of a specific university, being sure that this or that university provides a more efficient training. However, according to staff recruitment agencies, this requirement is becoming less important. A more important factor is not a particular institution but its specialization. *"There is a difference in training only if universities are specialized, of course, it is important ... The difference between education in Samara and Moscow –no, it's not at all important"* (Head of Employment Agency).

The analysis of the interviews shows that the concept of "a prestigious education" exists in the representations of employers. Many of them named schools where education is prestigious. But the suggestion that a prestigious university forms professional skills and expertise of a higher level does not find confirmation. More important indicators than the prestige of the university are professionalism and experience: *There are prestigious universities, though, again, it's not a fact that if you graduated from the Aerospace University, you're smarter than someone who graduated from the Polytechnic ...* (HR Director, Furniture Company);

Additional education is one of the positive characteristics of the applicant welcomed by the employers. In some cases, a certificate of additional education is one of the mandatory requirements for the candidate.

Additional education may be different in quality. The most important benefits are given to those who have certificates of international standard, which significantly raise the cost and the chances of the employee, whereas an ordinary course of coaching or sales management does not make much impression on the employers: *"Anyone can take these courses and seminars. While ASMC certificate for accountants, or mainly for finance directors, means work by European standards. This is not what everyone can get"* (Head of Employment Agency).

At the same time, one cannot say that a certificate of additional education increases the chances of an applicant for employment. For employers a more important skill is to apply knowledge, not the number of diplomas of additional education: *"Any paper provides evidence that he has been there. But this does not mean that he knows how to do it"* (Director of Recruitment Agency).

A diploma with honors, additional certificates confirming professional education of the candidate may not be taken into account in case of poor performance during the interview, test, or work during the trial period.

It should be noted that during the study the respondents categorized the jobs that require initial or secondary vocational education training as jobs that do not demand any professional training. This situation, in our opinion, can be explained by the fact that in the minds of employers vocational training is marked only by the highest level, in rare cases – by special secondary education. Roughly speaking, a higher education and a "non-higher" education (which covers all other levels of professional training). Initial vocational education or professional courses are not seen as vocational education.

Thus, employers' requirements for the educational level of applicants are high. Professional education is perceived as a weighty argument in favor of the employee. The requirement of higher education for getting a certain workplace suggests the level of development of the applicant, rather than tells us about his professionalism; however, it also has a positive connotation. Employers usually do not have a principal requirement that the applicant should be the graduate of a particular school. Claims may be made for the positions of senior management and relate to institutions of higher education. Additional education also increases the chances of applicants, but this indicator is not a decisive criterion for getting a job.

Employers' requirements for applicants vary, depending on the vacancy. Thus, the requirements for skilled workers are largely limited to specific technical ones. If the level of the applicants' professional competence suits the employer, nothing else is required from the employee; an extended list of requirements and information

about the job is limited to a minimum set of requirements accordingly. In the employment of line staff and senior management the list of requirements is longer: the desired level of education (usually higher education), professional experience, additional professional competencies, as well as a number of personal qualities (e.g. communication skills, resistance to stress, etc.).

Thus, the image of a profession is less associated with the content of work and more often "acquires" image, iconic, symbolic attributes.

Channels of Search for Workers

Search for workers is transmission of information on job opportunities by the employer by using various communication tools.

Let us consider information exchange in search of workers in terms of classical communication theories (Lasswell 1948). The main structural elements of the communication process are:

- *the sender;*
- *the message;*
- *communication channel;*
- *the recipient;*
- *feedback (effect of communication).*

In general terms the communication process can be described as follows. The sender (source), whose purpose is to produce some effect on the recipient, sends a particular message. The message can be encoded by means of signs and symbols that contain certain meanings. To understand the meaning of the message, the recipient has to decode it. Communication involves feedback, through which the sender makes sure that the message has reached its destination and is appropriately interpreted.

Search for workers is a part of the communication process of hiring, which is production of information, its coding and transmission. Thus, we consider search for employees in terms of specific features of transmission of information flows chosen by the employer, depending on the broadcast channel. Attempts have been made to

show how information channels, chosen by the employers, influence the forming of images of jobs (occupations).

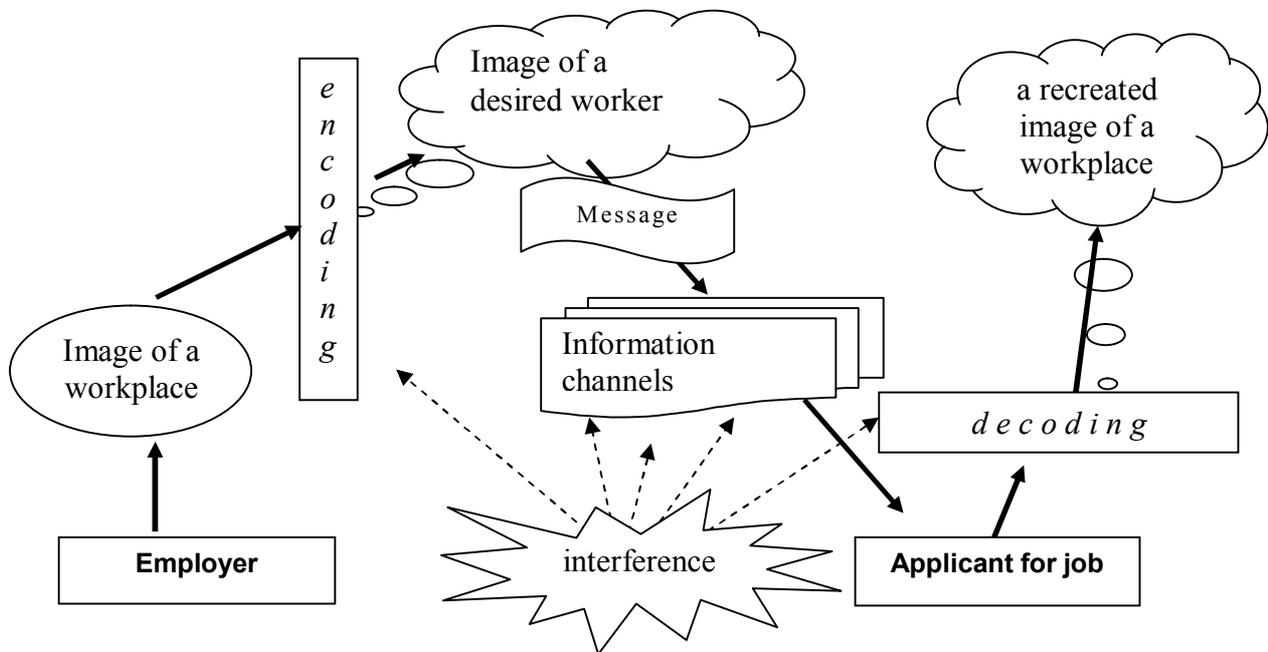


Chart 1. Scheme of information flows in the process of search for workers

The structural elements of the model of search for workers, shown in Chart 1, is to be explained.

The employer is the initiator of the communication process, but he doesn't act as a communicator directly sending the message. At the same time the employer decides in advance which source should be used to send information, formulates the message and points out the main conceptual categories which characterize professional and personal competencies of the required employee, in accordance with the idea of the demand for such workers in the workplace.

Encoding and decoding. Coding is making a message about the vacancy, i.e. "conversion" of the necessary professional skills for performing work operations at this workplace to the requirements for qualification, status, personality characteristics of a potential employee. The main point of the decoding process for a potential employee is to recreate the proposed job, possible bonuses and incentives for future

work on the basis of the requirements for applicants to fill the vacancy (and to "try it on oneself," that is to correlate with one's own ideas about one's capabilities, professional and social competencies and with the request for income and working conditions).

Message. This is a sensible (meaningful) and appropriately coded information. In the situation of search for workers a message is some information about a job vacancy and requirements for applicants.

Information Transmission Channels unite stakeholders of the communication process and information mediums from the moment of coding of the message to be sent till it is received by the addressee. A communication channel identifies a specific route that is used to send the message. The communication process is not limited to only one information channel and may include a greater number of actors involved in bringing the message to a potential customer.

The applicant (recipient of information) is the person who the message is addressed to. In our case, these are potential workers with professional and other qualities required by the employer. The ability of the recipient to perceive and decode the message, i.e. to recognize and interpret its meaning, is one of conditions of the communication process. This ability is determined by the competence of the recipient, his/her life experience, group affiliation, cultural level, etc.

Interference. In the communication process there are interference and various restrictions. Generally, interference means unplanned distortions which affect the process of communication. Overall, there are three major groups of interference: physical/technical (like typing errors in a printed message), psychological (defined by the differences in the perception of the transmitted signals by the participants of the communication process) and semantic (varied understanding of certain concepts (codes) by the informant and the recipient).

The scheme presented in Chart 1 is limited to the process of searching workers, eliminating the feedback, which is also a part of the process of hiring new employees. In the present study the issues of reverse impact of the recipient on the communicator

are left out of the researcher's attention. In our analysis we identify the steps of the employer, without the response of potential workers seeking for jobs.

Let us try and see how the structural elements of the communication process of search for workers affect the informative aspects of the information transmitted by employers, how the choice of information mediator is made, how the transmitted information affects the design and reconstruction of the image of the workplace and profession.

Contacting friends, relatives, acquaintances of employees is one of the most common ways to find candidates for a job. Compared to other channels, the use of personal contacts seems to be the most accessible way of recruiting workers. Analyzing social networks as a channel for sending messages about jobs, let's see how the elements of the communication process affect the flow of information and its transformation.

Having an idea of the job for which a worker is needed (popular professional and social competencies), the employer generates the image of a potential employee with necessary professional and personal characteristics. This information is a built-up representation translated in the communication process. Typically, personal contacts of the company CEOs are activated when recruiting for key business positions. In most cases they appeal to social networks of employees. The specifics of this information channel is participation of a large number of mediators in the process of sending messages about the vacancies.

The transmission of information is a series of transformations. The head of the organization, as the initiator of the search, cannot control the information being transmitted and is often not aware of the content of the broadcasted message. That means that in the communication process a significant role in the selection and presentation of information about the vacancy is played by intermediaries. Further transmission of the message through the social chain is mediated by the ideas of participants of the communication process, a new and each subsequent message represents the image of the vacancy from the position of another mediator. In this

case, we can say that the applicant receives "an image of the image." The more participants we have in the communication chain, the more modified image the recipient receives, compared to the original message.

While transmitting information, each participant singles out the most important from his/her point of view semantic accents concerning job vacancies. Besides, the use of personal contacts in search for employees limits the number of potential candidates, as the mediator decides whom exactly and what to tell. The selectivity in dissemination of information is determined by the mediator's own assessment of each potential recipient of information as a potential employee in a particular workplace.

An apparent advantage of this channel is completeness of information. Interpersonal interaction facilitates decoding, provides detailed information. Apart from that, search through social networks takes place in one social space. People who belong to the same social class, professional group, or have fairly similar social practices are involved in the search process. Transmission and interpretation of the message from the mediator to the applicant are in the same semantic field. For the participants of the communication process, understanding of the message is almost identical. So, the message of "a high salary" (even if the sum is not voiced) is perceived by the informant and the recipient alike, as the desired income is known.

Interpersonal relationships between the subjects of the communication process hinder perception of information. The perception of the received message is superimposed by the attitude of the mediator. Thus, personal contacts as a search channel have a serious drawback, since transmitted information is associated with the mediator and is more subjective.

Thus, transmission of information about a job, when applying to social networks, has the following features. Communication in the course of information transmission provides a fairly complete picture of the vacancy. The applicant receives an emotionally charged image of the workplace. At the same time, there takes place transformation of the message - mediators make their own emphases in the message.

The image of the job is associated with the mediator, and the perception of the received message is influenced by the personal attitude to the mediator.

This channel generates a detailed, "extended" image of the workplace. However, its "adjustment" is difficult, due to limited filtering capabilities (dosing) and control of the speed of information transmission. Search for employees through social networks recreates the qualifying, social and cultural level of workers; personal contacts is a weak channel for finding workers of "a new type", for newly created jobs.

State Employment Service Agency is one of the channels used by employers looking for new employees. Rigid formalization of the institution makes the channel rather narrow, movement of information flows in it is restricted by the given frame and has a certain order.

At the stage of writing a message the employer is confined in the selection of the information about the job and has no opportunity to stress the necessary (effective) details. Employers' information is fixed in standard forms, which contain only minimal details about the vacancy and requirements for applicants. The structure of the message is determined by the form of application. The coding procedure takes place with minimal involvement of the employer. Under the laws², employers can not mention any possible additional requirements for applicants.

The process of decoding of the message is mediated by specialists of services that provide functional data on the existing vacancies to the citizens looking for jobs. Generally, employees do not have a clear idea about the proposed job and cannot give additional information. One of the sources of possible information interference is, curiously enough, interpersonal communication between employees and specialists of employment services. The reason is the employment service specialists are not interested in employment.

² RF Labour Code Article 3. Prohibition of discrimination in employment. "No one can be limited in labor rights and freedoms, or receive any benefits, regardless of sex, race, color, nationality, language, origin, property, social and employment status, age, place of residence, religion, political opinion, membership or non-membership in public associations, as well as other circumstances, not related to the qualifications of the employee. "

According to employers, the state employment service as a channel of employment has more disadvantages than advantages. The main barrier in accessing this mediator is perception of the employment service as of not-a-member of the labor market aimed at recruitment of personnel for enterprises, as of a service-oriented "state aid to the unemployed," namely, registration of unemployed to give them benefits. *"I should say, in any case, a person goes there when he knows for sure that he has no prospects. He goes to the employment agency to get money ... and not to find a job"* (Director, Air Company).

The image of a profession has a number of specific features when information about the vacancy passes through the employment service. Incomplete information about the employers' requirements, formal approach of the recruitment staff and lack of understanding of potential jobs form a vague image of the profession. The formal restriction on the amount of information about job vacancies does not allow the employer to construct an image of the desired employee in accordance with the requirements. The same reasons interfere with the applicant decoding the message. Interpersonal communication (as opposed to search through personal contacts) does not help to recreate "a full-fledged" image of the working place.

When applying to *private recruitment agencies*, employers often cannot accurately articulate requirements for professional and personal qualities of a potential employee, as it is demanded by private agencies. Work on specifying and detailing of the required characteristics of the applicant is the task of the recruitment agency staff.

When there is lack of a clear image of the required employee, the coding procedure is reduced to clarifying the responsibilities in this job and formulating them as the requirements to the employee. The recruitment agency staff, by specifying the requirements of employers, form a list of necessary characteristics of the applicant, thereby creating a more complete image of the profession and the workplace.

The agency staff is directly involved in the process of making a message about the vacancy. In such cases agencies are information mediators, and the process of transmission is similar to the mechanism of social networking (use of personal contacts). Even if possible candidates to fill the vacancies are searched through the database, the job offer is addressed to the applicants and takes the form of informal communication. Interpersonal communication greatly simplifies and enhances understanding between the participants.

The studied cases of using the channel shows that recruitment agencies are more often employed to find highly skilled elite professionals, not workers of mass professions.

So, the flow of information about jobs through private recruitment agencies have the following features. The image of a workplace is actually formed by the agency staff, interpersonal communication helps to provide as much information about the vacancy as possible. There are almost no problems with encoding and subsequent decoding of the message, as information on vacancies and job seekers is actually collected by one and the same mediator - a specialist of the agency. Information loss and interference are minimal.

Advertisements in the Media. Staff search through placing information in the media is a communication process which involves a text (verbal or visual) message transfer.

When the employer chooses this channel, he must decide where to place information. Currently, the market represents a wide variety of media, specializing in labor mediation. Use of such publications is determined by the employers' idea about their target audience. Ads about jobs which do not require professional education (e.g. loader, cleaner) can be published in the free newspapers.

Use of special editions minimizes interference in encoding and decoding information. It is supposed that the employer and the applicant are in the same context of communication, have background knowledge about the processes in the labor market. By posting job advertisements in the media, the employer assumes that

the message will be interpreted by the recipient in the semantic categories which were implied by the sender.

Processing of the text to be placed in the media has a number of specific features. As a rule, want ads are concise and highlight the most important characteristics from the employer's point of view. Employers have more opportunities to limit and manipulate information about the vacancy.

While personal interaction makes it possible to characterize the working position, the specifics of the company and to describe additional features of work better, want ads in the media are limited to a minimum set of symbols (words) describing the required employee.

The information provided by the employer for the employee depends on the vacancy, on the profession. For jobs that do not require professional education there are only a job title and a wage rate (but not always). There is often a requirement - no bad habits. These features are basic constructs of the image of a profession, and in the views of employers, they are sufficient to be understood by potential employees.

The communication process of finding employees with the help of the media has a number of barriers and restrictions. Employers should succinctly express their view of the required employee. Abbreviations often lead to barriers in understanding, making it difficult to interpret information correctly. There are technical obstacles: these are misprints, placement of ads in other categories, delays in publication.

Employers often duplicate information by posting vacancy notices in various media, which leads to a distortion in the evaluation of the real need for the employee in the process of decoding messages. Frequency of mention of a profession in newspaper ads forms the readers' idea of the demand for specialists of this profession, which is not always true because, on the one hand, in ads they do not specify the number of required workers, on the other hand, a want ad about one and the same vacancy can be posted more than once.

Difficulty in decoding of the image of a workplace is also caused by the fact that most ads are hard to identify with specific organizations, as in most ads only a

phone number is mentioned, and some ads are published not by the employers but mediators (employment agencies or individuals). As a result, applicants are not able to correlate the data about the vacancy provided in the advertisement with their professional qualifications.

So, the specific features of forming an image of a vacancy in the media (brevity of information, its formality and a schematic representation) form quite a scanty image of a workplace. The manner of presentation complicates the decoding process, hinders the process of transmission and perception of the message. The above-mentioned constraints make the employers apply to the channel only when searching for low-skilled workers and workers of mass professions. Individual job offers are usually not published (except for mandatory announcements of employment on a competitive basis³).

In sum, there is no doubt that the name of the desired position or a set of requirements of employers to employees create an image of a profession. But the choice of the channel to search information has a particular importance in forming the image of a profession, it marks the workplace. Let's say a mechanic who is being searched through the media (or a want-ad on posts) is "very different" from the one who is searched through private recruitment agencies or the manager's personal contacts. Cleaners are not searched through personal contacts and astronomers - in newspapers ads. Competitors, in turn, identify and reflect the search channel (decode information). Accordingly, the potential employee with a high level of aspirations will not apply for a job to employment agencies, even if he knows about them. Thus, by using a particular search channel, the employer tries to indicate the status of the vacancy, its prestige, level of responsibility, and, indirectly, possible remuneration. The search channel is one of the factors for constructing the image of a profession by the employers in the mind of job seekers.

³ For example, the positions of the faculty of academic institutions of higher education, or government officials.

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