

Investigation of Ethical Business Practices in a Temporary Employment Agency: The Role of Identification

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Abstract: This ethnographic study focuses on recruitment consultants' adherence to ethical values and non-discrimination rules when delivering services to clients. Exploring business practices within temporary employment agencies reveals significant value conflicts between moral, legal, and profit considerations and customer satisfaction. The results show that ethical behavior among salespeople is driven by their identification with the company's values and the profession itself. Furthermore, the study highlights managers' central role in disseminating and maintaining these values within their teams. This article adds to the existing knowledge on ethical behavior in salespeople. Additionally, the findings are transferable to commercial teams in general, as well as to HR practitioners involved in the recruitment process.

Keywords: norms, recruitment, business ethics, sales team management, salesforce

Introduction:

Studies on workplace discrimination identify 25 criteria (art.225-1 of the law) that lead to differential treatment, such as gender, physical appearance, or social background, limiting access to employment. These forms of discrimination hinder social inclusion, a priority of European policies (Lisbon Strategy, 2000). The ILO emphasizes that they slow business growth and exacerbate inequalities. Despite French laws penalizing such practices (up to three years in prison and a €45,000 fine), discrimination persists in hiring and within companies (promotion, dismissal, etc.).

This situation raises questions about the effectiveness of sanctions and the ability of businesses to comply with laws while seeking to improve their economic performance (Merca-Bruns, 2020). Indeed, companies must manage their image and optimize recruitment to remain competitive (Warnier et al., 2013).

Research shows employers' decisions are often based on subjective beliefs rather than employees' skills (Hennequin and Karakas, 2007). In certain sectors, such as retail and banking, customers scrutinize ethical practices, which tends to improve business relationships (Tsiotsou et al., 2021). Adopting ethical behavior allows salespeople to perform better (Cadogan et al., 2019) and strengthens the bond with the company. So companies could pay attention to the manner salespersons interact with clients taking into account fairness or Business Ethics. Ethical behavior in commerce practices requires researcher attention to comprehend the phenomenon and highlight factors contributing to their adoption in the sales team. The research question is focused on what factors contribute to ethical behavior in the sales team.

To address this question, we draw on the theoretical framework of identification. Indeed, the effects of identification foster engaged employees who align their actions with organizational goals, whereas its absence can lead to disengagement or negative behaviors (Van Dick et al., 2004; Jo and Joo, 2011). This research focuses on the temporary labor sector, specifically within Adecco, providing an insightful context for examining ethical practices. The sector has faced issues related to discrimination, and recruitment processes are generally sensitive to such concerns. Through an ethnographic study, supported by interviews with 12 managers and 25 sales advisors, we aim to explore the challenges and opportunities of promoting ethical recruitment while deepening the understanding of professional identification's role.

The article is structured as follows. The first part briefly addresses the state of the art concerning the factors influencing the ethical behavior of salespeople and then discusses the theoretical principles of identification. The second part specifies the research methodology, data collection, processing, and results. The third part briefly discusses the theoretical contributions and managerial implications, highlighting the limitations and research perspectives before concluding.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Factors Explaining the Ethical Behavior of Salespeople

The organizational climate influences employee behavior and includes the concept of ethical climate, which is more challenging to define. Its perception varies according to culture (Barbera, 2014) and refers to the shared feeling that behaviors are appropriate for managing situations with

moral implications (Cullen et al., 2003). An ethical climate strengthens employees' trust in the company and fosters cooperation (Rousseau, 1995; Baillet and Van Lange, 2013).

Conversely, a climate focused on personal interest reduces employee engagement, as they perceive the organization as encouraging selfish behavior (Trevino et al., 1998). Unethical behavior harms customer satisfaction and their relationships with salespeople (Barnett and Valentine, 2004; Roman and Ruiz, 2005). These behaviors are influenced by individual criteria (age, seniority, gender) and organizational factors (Victor and Cullen, 1987). Moreover, the perception of actions contrary to moral rules is correlated with employee disengagement (Barnett and Valentine, 2004).

Research shows that individual variables, team exchanges, and the internalization process of moral rules determine employees' ethical behavior. Identification with the company is also a key factor often overlooked in studies of sales forces (Fabi et al., 2000; McLaren, 2013), calling for empirical study on this subject.

1.2. Different Forms of Employee Identification

1.2.1. Organizational Identification

Organizational identification, studied in organizational behavior, answers the question: "Who am I to the organization?" and guides employees' actions. It occurs when an individual integrates the organization's characteristics into their identity (Chédotel, 2004), a process related to social categorization and self-evaluation through social identity (Tajfel, 1981). This identification is based on the alignment of values, goals, and ideology between the individual and the organization (Ashforth et al., 2008).

It strengthens employee involvement, particularly through emotional attachment, and encourages the pursuit of organizational goals, promoting cooperation, motivation, performance, and resistance to change (Bénet and Ventolini, 2019). Identification thus explains why individuals support or do not support their organization.

1.2.2. Professional Identification and Roles

Identification is not limited to the organization but extends to the profession and the job. It refers to the degree to which a person defines themselves by their work and the characteristics associated with the role (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). When an employee identifies with their profession, they integrate these attributes and values into their identity (Steward et al., 2009).

Professional groups and communities of practice play an important role in forming a collective identity (Yang-Yoshihara, 2023). The socialization process involves acquiring specific skills and internalizing the group's attitudes and values. This process produces shared beliefs and rules (Becher and Trowler, 2001), fostering a common understanding of events. For example, a sales manager may see themselves as a coach, supervisor, or manager, with each identity influencing their actions based on how they perceive themselves (Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

2. Research Methodology and Results

2.1. Data Collection and Analysis

The relationship between temporary workers, their employer Adecco, and the client forms a tripartite dynamic. The client specifies the required skills for the position and employs the temporary worker for a limited period. The sales team, under pressure to recruit qualified

candidates, may resort to discriminatory practices to meet client demands. Furthermore, depending on the assignment, temporary employees have specific rights that the client may fail to uphold. It is also the responsibility of the sales team to ensure that employees can exercise these rights. This tightly regulated commercial relationship inherently carries a risk of discrimination.

To address these challenges, Adecco has established a long-standing non-discrimination policy and robust diversity management practices. Operating through an extensive network of commercial agencies across Europe, the company contributes significantly to workforce integration while aligning its business practices with broader recruitment trends. Specialists in diversity and legal compliance assist employees in ensuring their work adheres to legal standards and reflects the company's core values. Insights into Adecco's ethical objectives were gathered through interviews with executives overseeing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and the commercial division. Additionally, managers within the agencies work closely with their sales teams. Observations and interviews were conducted to examine how managers and staff uphold non-discrimination policies in their efforts to match workforce supply with client demand.

Data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews with 25 recruiters and 12 agency managers, each lasting 1 to 1.5 hours. These interviews aimed to identify the factors influencing diversity management behaviors among temporary workers and, by extension, their ethical practices. According to social psychology, individuals justify their actions based on internal or external causes, shaped by their perceived stability and control over these factors (Weiner, 1985, 1986). These causal attributions were analyzed using structural-semantic analysis (Mucchielli, 2006), a form of content analysis that reveals the connections (structure) between key ideas (causes and attributes) articulated by participants.

The data collection process was further enriched through a combination of participant and non-participant observations over one year. This included regular presence in the agency, participation in meetings, involvement in recruitment activities, and the creation of newsletters focused on socially responsible practices. The findings from these observations were triangulated with interview data during the structural-semantic analysis to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

2.2. Factors Contributing to the Adoption of Ethical Behaviors

Recruitment managers and advisors mention the "Christmas order effect," where clients seek candidates with specific characteristics to fill their roles, often based on stereotypes. This logic can limit diversity, creating challenges for recruiters who struggle to convince clients to broaden their criteria beyond these fixed representations. Some clients, particularly in large companies, are more open and willing to base their recruitment on skills rather than stereotypes, as diversity is sometimes required for long-term contracts.

Recruiters and managers are aware of the ethical risks when they comply with discriminatory demands from some clients. They emphasize the importance of adhering to non-discrimination laws and stress the benefits of a more inclusive approach for clients. While the law is perceived as a constraint, most recruiters believe they must promote diversity, not only during recruitment but also during the integration process and throughout the management of the relationship between the temporary candidate and the client (health and safety at work, permanent hiring, training, etc.).

Ethical dilemmas arise when clients, as paying customers, position themselves as the sole decision-makers, demanding specific profiles. Recruiters, concerned with satisfying their clients and achieving their sales targets, sometimes conflict with the principles of managing diversity. Managers play a key role in supporting their teams in facing these challenges, encouraging recruiters to mitigate ethical risks. Peer exchanges allow the sharing of solutions to prevent discrimination, consolidate professional practices, and create new workplace norms (rules, tips, and argumentation).

Additionally, many recruiters and employees identify strongly with their teams, often viewing them as a family unit. They are drawn to the egalitarian values and commitment to CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) that guide their work environment. This shared vision fosters a sense of purpose and motivates ethical commercial behavior, which managers and recruiters alike describe as a natural and expected part of their profession. Beyond this shared culture, employees believe their team's values reflect a modern, inclusive approach to recruitment that aligns with societal changes and their principles.

3. Discussion

3.1 Theoretical contributions

The factors influencing ethical practices among recruiters are relational, deontological, normative, and individual. Recruiters do not view themselves solely as sales professionals but also as advocates for diversity, actively contributing to the creation of a fairer workplace. A key element supporting their ability to fulfill this dual role is their identification with their company, team, and manager. This identification builds a sense of belonging and aligns individual behavior with organizational values.

When employees feel strongly connected to their team, they develop a collective sense of pride, responsibility, and accountability. This shared identity helps them navigate ethical dilemmas by reinforcing the idea they are part of something larger than themselves—a group that values fairness, inclusion, and ethical standards. For example, a recruiter who identifies with a team that prioritizes non-discrimination policies will naturally be more motivated to uphold these principles, even under challenging circumstances such as client pressure to engage in discriminatory practices.

Managers play a key role in strengthening this identification process by embodying and reinforcing the company's values. Through their actions, managers act as role models, demonstrating how to balance client demands with adherence to ethical standards. Their visible commitment to these principles helps recruiters internalize the same values, making ethical behavior feel natural and necessary. This alignment with managers and the broader organization fosters adaptation, enabling employees to maintain their integrity even in high-pressure situations.

This research shows that identification with the company's values is not static but dynamic, evolving through learning, experience, and interactions within the workplace. Organizational practices such as structured training, mentoring, and peer exchange play a vital role in strengthening this identification. These activities help employees internalize ethical standards, ensuring that diversity management and non-discrimination policies are respected. Conversely, a lack of identification with the organization or insufficient socialization can lead to negative behaviors, such as disregarding ethical principles to satisfy client demands or meet short-term sales targets.

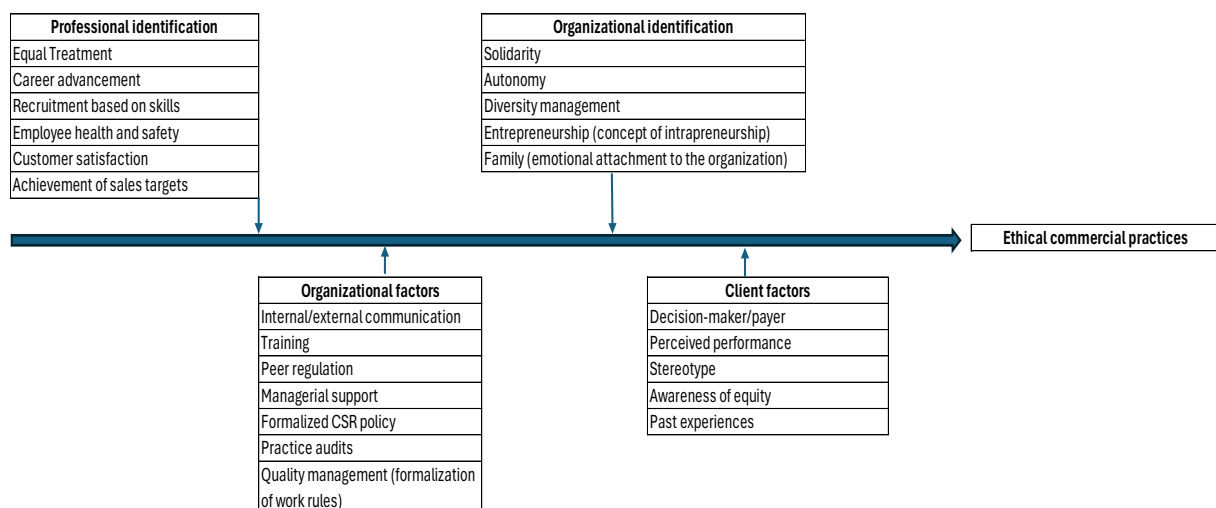
The manager's role in fostering this identification extends beyond setting expectations. They must actively support their teams, creating a culture of trust and inclusion where employees feel valued and heard. Managers should encourage open dialogue about ethical challenges, provide constructive feedback, and ensure that employees have the resources they need to make principled decisions.

When employees strongly identify with their company, team, and manager, they are more likely to see ethical behavior as integral to their professional identity rather than as an external obligation. This internalization helps create a work environment where ethical practices are not only encouraged but also deeply ingrained, contributing to long-term organizational success and meaningful social impact.

Furthermore, this identification has a cascading effect: employees who feel supported and aligned with their manager and team are more likely to reflect these values in their interactions with clients, reinforcing the company's reputation as an ethical and inclusive organization.

In summary, this research presents two categories of factors in the following diagram: individual factors related to the identification mechanism and external factors—organizational and client-related (client factors). Figure 1 below details the content of each factors contributing of ethical commercial practices.

Figure 1: Processus of Ethical Commercial Practices



3.2 Managerial recommendations

Managers should focus on embedding these principles into daily operations to strengthen ethical practices and ensure alignment with the company's values. One effective approach is providing recruiters with clear, persuasive communication tools highlighting the company's commitment to diversity and ethical hiring practices. These materials can help sales teams confidently articulate the benefits of inclusivity to clients while addressing potential concerns or objections.

Ethical principles should also be integrated directly into work processes, ensuring they guide every stage of client and candidate interactions. For example, including clauses on diversity and inclusion in client contracts can formalize expectations and foster mutual understanding. Additionally, financial incentives could encourage adherence to these principles, rewarding recruiters for outcomes such as hiring underrepresented candidates or ensuring compliance with

anti-discrimination policies. This could be particularly impactful in promoting the hiring of individuals with disabilities or other marginalized groups.

Training plays a crucial role in fostering ethical professionalism. Programs should be designed for managers and sales teams, focusing on practical skills like identifying ethical dilemmas, navigating client demands, and understanding anti-discrimination laws. Real-world scenarios and interactive workshops can help employees translate these principles into daily operations. To further support decision-making, recruiters should be encouraged to reflect on their actions using a simple framework, asking questions such as: Is this legal? Does it align with company values? Could it cause harm? Would I feel comfortable if this decision were made public? How would my peers or manager assess it?

Creating opportunities for peer collaboration is another essential strategy. Regular discussions among recruiters can help them share solutions to ethical challenges, learn from each other's experiences, and build a stronger sense of shared professional values. These exchanges foster a culture where ethical behavior is seen not as a constraint but as a natural part of the job.

By embedding these practices into organizational processes, providing consistent leadership, and fostering an environment of shared accountability, companies can create a workplace where ethical behavior becomes second nature, ultimately contributing to both business success and social impact.

4. Limitations, future research, and conclusion

The limitations of this work lie in the sector of activity and the number of people interviewed. Furthermore, in France, the principle of social responsibility is often pushed by legal texts framing the practices of employees independently of company policies. A study should be conducted in other social and legal systems to better identify the contributing factors to the adoption of ethical practices and then the role of identification according to three levels: (i) the company, (ii) the job, and (iii) the workgroup. Even if the results of this study demonstrate this triple identification, it is not possible to rule on the prevalence of their role. A quantitative study should be able to shed light on this point. Nevertheless, this research opens up perspectives for understanding ethical practices and is transferable to temporary work companies and recruitment practitioners as well.

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