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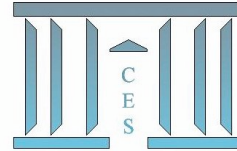
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## **When the first interaction matters : Recruitment in the French retailing**

Géraldine RIEUCAU, Marie SALOGNON

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# When the first interaction matters: Recruitment in the French retailing

Géraldine Rieucou\* et Marie Salognon\*\*

## Abstract:

In France, one of ten recently-hired workers works in retailing. The literature provides evidence about the screening criteria used to fill low-wage vacancies in stores. However, neither the stage when criteria matter nor the forefront role of information channels (direct applications, word-of-mouth, employment agency and job ads) has been well explored. Drawing on 35 interviews conducted in 2010-2011, with actors involved in recruitment activities and with recently-hired workers in large stores in Greater Paris, this article explores the initial interaction between job seekers and recruiters. It is argued that the screening criteria vary according to the way employers received information about applicants and first interact with them (by mail, phone or face-to-face). This contribution highlights the importance of walk-in applications, which prioritize selection based on residence, appearances and availability. Changes in the first interaction impact the whole selection process and may change the profile of the workers hired.

**Keywords:** Economy of conventions, French retailing, information channels, low-wage jobs, recruitment, screening criteria

*Le recrutement dans la grande distribution en France : le rôle déterminant de la première interaction*

## Résumé:

En France, un travailleur sur dix récemment embauchés travaille dans le commerce de détail. La littérature traite largement des critères de sélection utilisés pour recruter sur les postes à bas salaire dans les magasins, mais l'agencement de ces critères ainsi que le rôle clef des canaux d'information (candidatures spontanées, bouche à oreille, petites annonces, agences pour l'emploi), ont été peu étudiés jusqu'à présent. Prenant appui sur 35 entretiens menés en 2010-2011 auprès d'acteurs impliqués dans les activités de recrutement et de travailleurs récemment embauchés dans les moyennes et grandes surfaces de la Région parisienne, cet article explore spécifiquement la première interaction entre chercheurs d'emploi et recruteurs. Il montre que les critères de sélection varient selon le canal par lequel les employeurs reçoivent des informations sur les candidats et selon la façon dont se déroule le premier contact (par courrier, par téléphone ou en face-à-face). L'article met en évidence l'importance des candidatures spontanées déposées en magasin, qui favorisent une sélection fondée sur le lieu de résidence, les apparences et la disponibilité. Il montre aussi qu'un changement dans la première interaction peut avoir un impact sur l'ensemble du processus de sélection et modifier le profil des personnes recrutées.

**Mots clés:** Canaux d'information, Critères de sélection, Economie des conventions, Emplois à bas salaires, Grande distribution en France, Recrutement

**JEL codes:** B59, J60, J71, L81

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## Introduction

Human Resources managers, employers, job seekers and labour market intermediaries are all involved in recruitment processes. Exploring how these actors interact and coordinate their views and actions is crucial to understanding the functioning of labour market and the impact recruitment activities have on employment patterns. Drawing on interviews conducted in 2010-2011 with Human Resource (HR) managers, employers, recently-hired workers and labour market intermediaries, this article examines the recruitment processes for low-wage jobs in large food and specialized stores in Greater Paris. As in most industrialized countries, retailing is one of the largest and most labour intensive sectors in France. Despite the recession, the level of turnover remains high and the sector is still recruiting: according to the French Labour Force Survey, around 10 % of people recently hired in 2011, work in retailing.

The literature presents some evidence about employers' requirements and job search in retailing. There is an increasing demand among retailers for the availability of part-time and work during unsocial hours, as well as for soft skills based on communication and presentation (Carré et al, 2010; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). Meanwhile, among job seekers, women with responsibilities of children and lone parents are reputed to seek part-time jobs, located close to their homes (McKie et al, 2010, Nickson, 2004) while students are keen to accept flexible and unsocial hours (Hart et al, 2006; McGauran, 2004). To some extent, job seekers attitudes towards jobs in retail seem to match with retailers' expectations. However, the way these actors interact has to be explored, to understand how some screening criteria are valued and to point out possible changes in recruitment.

In this article, it is argued that the initial interaction between job seekers and recruiters is decisive for the whole selection process. According to the French approach of Economy of conventions, actors may rely on conventions, which are compromises based on information and evaluative forms (Thévenot, 2001). More precisely, the selection held by employers depends on the information they have about applicants. Furthermore, since the seminal works of Rees (1966) and Granovetter (1974), it is admitted that there is a diversity of information channels in the labour market: word-of-mouth, public and private agencies, job advertisements and direct applications. Focusing on the retail sector in the Paris area, the core issue of this contribution is to disentangle the characteristics of the initial interaction between job seekers and employers, which is shaped by information channels. The screening criteria used vary according to the way employers interact with applicants (by mail, phone or face-to-face) and possibly, to the trust placed on the intermediary who recommends the candidate.

The first section reviews the outcomes regarding employment, screening methods and job search in the retail industry. It discusses the theoretical framework and presents the survey. The second section points out the prevalence of 'in-store channels' (walk-in applications, word-of-mouth, job adverts in the window). Such channels strengthen the local dimension of recruitment, by targeting people who live close to the store. They also allow face-to-face meetings which prioritize selection based on appearances and attitudes. The third section clarifies the impact of the initial interaction for the ensuing selection. By implementing a new hiring process, HR managers are able to change their usual conventions. Initial interaction and screening criteria could be modified and this change may impact the profile of the workers hired.

### **1. What about employment and recruitment practices in the retail industry?**

There have been dramatic changes within the retail industry over the last decades in most industrialized countries. Firms have had to face strong competition on prices and pressures on labour costs. With mass distribution, the number of large-scale establishments has been growing and opening hours beyond standard daytime, weekends and public holidays have been extending. Increasing part-time work has been the most frequent instrument used by retailers to adjust staffing level with customer flows (Jany-Catrice and Lehndorff, 2002). The extension of self-service systems and some technological innovations have contributed to reduce skill requirements (Campbell and Chalmers, 2008). In sum, part-time work, fragmented tasks and limited product's knowledge are linked to easy substitutability of workers and to elevated level of staff turnover (Gregory and O'Reilly, 1996).

According to cross-national comparisons, French patterns of employment in retailing have similarities with other countries and some distinctive characteristics. As their international counterparts, French organizations have adopted a strategy to recruit workforce that is flexible enough to fit with fluctuating hour's but that is also interested in stable patterns of employment, in order to reduce turnover to a reasonable proportion. Part-time employment has been growing, especially for women with young children and students. Despite that, part-timers are fewer in France than elsewhere and their number of working hours is actually higher (Jany-Catrice and Lehndorff, 2002; Carré et al., 2010). In this respect, institutional aspects matter: the French retail food unions have won a minimum part-time of 26 hours and the universal child care system supports long part-time employment (Askenazy et al, 2008). As in many other countries, women are dominating front-line services while managers and better paid positions are held by men (Observatoire prospectif, 2010).

Jobs in stores require low skills and are mainly low-paid, with some variation between positions: sales-counters and sales-assistants in specialized stores have to know about products, to interact with customers and to operate the registers, whereas few skills are required for food sales-assistants and for cashiers. Pressure on workers to improve their productivity is especially important in France, consequently, the level of staff turnover is high (Bernard 2005, Askenazy et al., 2008). Promotion opportunities are still highlighted by French retailers to encourage employees to be stable, but actually, few of workers are involved in ascendant mobility (Bernard, 2012; Waelli, 2009). Even in the current recession, the turnover remains important and large stores have to continuously recruit.

### *1.1. Recruitment in retail: a focus on screening criteria*

Several studies deal with the contradiction between, on one hand, high level of unemployment and on the other hand, retention problems and difficulties to fill low-wage positions in stores (Hart et al., 2006; Lindsay, 2005). Indeed, work in retailing mostly suffers a poor image, reflecting the general lack of status afforded to part-time, low-paid and female-dominated work (Broadbridge, 2003). Unemployed job seekers, without experience in service-oriented jobs, are especially keen to rule out such 'Mcjobs' (Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004). Lindsay (2005) suggests to acknowledge appropriate skills and to encourage training in order to improve job satisfaction and to make jobs in stores more realistic options for unemployed people. Having previously worked in the sector is a positive signal, but applicants without experience do not suffer real barriers and diploma is not a frequent selection criterion. Required skills to hold low-wage jobs in stores are quite easy to get. As a result, inexperienced, low-skilled or unemployed applicants could be taken on and trained. Nonetheless, training in the retail sector is lagging behind of other sectors. Meanwhile, the language of employability has been widely adopted by retailers and this rhetoric could be translated into demands for motivation and flexibility, right attitudes and appearances (looking good/sounding right) (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). Emphasis on appearances might be related to a wider discrimination against older job seekers in retailing (Hart et al. 2006, Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004). The focus on flexibility is favorable to students (Canny 2002, McGauran, 2004), while part-time jobs are supposed to coincide with social arrangements for women with responsibilities for children (Carré et al, 2010) or lone parents (Nickson et al., 2004). Furthermore, employers' expectations and work allocation strongly rely on gender division (Askenazy et al., 2008). As McKie et al (2010: 789) stated, work in retail is gendered and gendering.

Screening criteria used to fill vacancies in stores are well known but the focus on criteria is not sufficient. The studies mentioned above do not pay attention to the stage and the conditions such

criteria matter (through an initial sifting based on CVs or during an interview?) nor to the forefront role of channels which carry them. By analyzing selection process in five low-wage companies in the UK, including a supermarket, Manning (2000) reports that the long-term unemployed or inexperienced people might be rejected when the filtering is based on CVs, but when they get an interview, these people are not disadvantaged compared to others. The characteristics of the interaction have to be taken into account because they impact the selection criteria which matter. Furthermore, the relationship between information channels and the type of information conveyed must be explored.

### *1.2. A framework to explore how job seekers and employers interact*

The French approach of the Economy of conventions provides an adequate framework to figure out how information shapes interactions and evaluations. It analyses how actors solve their coordination problems under a context of uncertainty and limited rationality (Latsis et al., 2010). Job seekers and employers manage to shape uncertainty and to coordinate their actions by relying on ‘conventions’, which are compromises based on cognitive forms (information) and on evaluative forms (Thévenot, 2001). Indeed, in the labour market, job seekers have to get details about the job vacancies whereas employers need indications about the quality of the applicants. Drawing on the information they have, job seekers are able to evaluate the offers while employers are able to assess the applications (Eymard-Duvernay and Marchal, 1997). One of the added-value of this approach is to point out the diversity of conventions and to contextualize them. In fact, the convention used by employers to select applicants depends on the information they have, therefore recruiters may rely on different conventions (Salognon, 2007). Thévenot (1985, 2001) especially devotes attention on the ‘format’ of the information by distinguishing written from oral one and by examining whether information is standardized or not. Resumes, cover letters and application forms display written information, which prioritizes criteria like diploma, experience and working life. Such information differs from the oral indications given during an interview or a chat, which could be about motivation, availability, but also attitudes and appearances. Written information is more standardized than oral one and could circulate in long-distance, like through the web (Marchal, Mellet and Rieucan, 2007; Marchal and Rieucan, 2010). By contrast, relevant information which circulates within a limited and narrowed space is obtained through an oral discussion.

Information channels must be taken into account. Rees (1966) distinguishes intensive search in labour market, which procures a lot of details about few applicants (word-of-mouth) from extensive search, which gives little information about a lot of applicants (job advertisements for example). In other



words, channels can be examined in relation to the type of information they convey. The seminal work of Granovetter (1974) illuminates the weight of social networks – especially weak ties – and the pivotal role of trust in labour market coordination. According to him, word-of-mouth carries rich, updated, accurate information about a few number of applicants but, most of all, it provides faithful details. Trusted information circulates through networks, mostly in an oral format and mitigates or enhances the content of the resumes (Marchal and Rieucan, 2010). Networks help to bring employers and job seekers closer and often rely on local, social, gender or racial dimension (Ioannides and Datcher Loury, 2004). Focusing on both employers' hiring and job seekers' search methods, several studies have shown that channels differ from one another (Holzer, 1988, Frijters et al, 2005). The value of the current article is to investigate how channels impact the whole selection process, by distinguishing written from oral information, at-a-distance from close interaction and by stressing on the crucial role of trust.

### 1.3. *Methodology*

The survey is based on 35 semi-structured interviews, with managers or employees involved in recruitment in stores, HR managers in head-quarters, recently-hired employees and agents in employment agencies (tables 1 and 2). Two observations have also been made. Interviews and observations were conducted in Paris and its suburbs from September 2010 to September 2011. The case studies concern external recruitments to fill cashier, sale-assistant and storekeeper positions in supermarkets and hypermarkets, in two specialized stores (toys and recreation) and in one Department store. Contracts offered are mostly temporary but they often develop into permanent. Stores mainly belong to chains while some are independent (franchised or cooperative shops). All the stores are medium, large or super-large scale establishments.

#### *Semi-structured interviews*

Store manager was asked to provide some information about the latest recruitment she conducted. When the respondent was a HR manager (head quarter), the interview mainly focus on usual practices. The main questions concerned the characteristics of the job offer (position, location, wage and contract), the way of advertising about a vacancy and how the first interaction with applicant occurred. Questions also concerned the number of applications received, the methods and devices used to select among them (sift on resumes, guideline for the interview etc.), the persons involved in the process (head-quarter, employment agency), the profile of the applicants rejected.

Recently hired employee was asked about his efforts and actions to find a job, the duration of his job search, his previous position (out of work, currently employed etc.), the reasons for applying to a job in



the retail industry, the possible previous experience in such sector. A second group of questions concerned the way of becoming aware of the vacancy and applying for the job (job finding channel). Typical questions were about the content of the resume and cover letter, the possible test, application form, practical simulation.

### *Observations*

Two observations have been done: (1) HR assistants working in a central recruitment room (FCH1) (2) Two job interviews, conducted by a store manager (TCH).

Interviews were performed face-to-face, except for one which took place on the phone. Their duration varies from 25 to 90 minutes. With semi-structured schedule and open-ended questions, the respondent could expound their views in a relatively unconstrained way. Interviews and observations have been taped (in 5 cases, the interviewee didn't accept to be recorded) and they have been transcribed. Documentation from the company website or directly from the person interviewed also affords details about the firms' recruitment practices.

**Table 1. The case-studies**

	<i>Supermarkets and hypermarkets (Food) (23 interviews)</i>	<i>Specialized stores (12 interviews)</i>
<i>Stores belonging to chain (CH) (24 interviews)</i>	FCH1-FCH2-FCH3	TCH (Toys-chain) RCH (Recreation-chain)
<i>Independent (I) stores (11 interviews)</i>	FI1-FI2-FI3-FI4	DS (Department store)

**Table 2. Positions of interviewees**

<i>Employees recently hired (12 interviews)</i>	<i>Person involved in recruitment in store (10 interviews)</i>	<i>Person involved in recruitment in headquarter (9 interviews)</i>	<i>LM intermediaries (4 interviews)</i>
Check operators (cashiers)	Store managers	HR manager	<i>Pôle emploi</i>
Storekeepers	Department manager	HR assistant	Temp. agency
Sales assistants	Clerks		

## 2. A close relationship between channels and screening criteria

This part shall disentangle and highlight the filtering mechanisms of the first interaction between job seekers and employers. It makes clear that the main channels are locally embedded and that they reflect the suitable applicants the firm is willing to attract. Distinction between hand-delivered and mailed applications is especially relevant

### 2.1. *In-store channels to select suitable applicants from the local labour market*

Hiring channels reflect the constraints the firms have to cope with. In the retail industry, they must be cheap and quick. Because of the high level of turnover, they also must continually carry applicants. Actually, according to data from the Labour Force Survey, in 2009, 37.9% of the employees recently hired have found their job via a direct application in France and this proportion is 45.4% in the whole retail sector. The prevalence of direct applications in retail still remains when controlling some characteristics of the worker, the job and the establishment, the location and the rate of unemployment (De Larquier and Rieucau. 2012). Social networks are the second job-finding channel in the French labour market (20.2%) and in retail (17.8%).

The survey's findings confirm national outcomes from LFS. Unsolicited applications, word-of-mouth and in-store adverts are the main channels for external recruitments according to the persons surveyed. Managers especially appreciate unsolicited applications because they are costless (free) and because they are received and updated daily. As Stephen Wood (1993:4) stated, this channel, how informal may appear, is not necessarily casual or devoid of rationality. Walk-in applications, contacts from current employees and in-store advertisements are all 'in-store channels' which prioritize the store as the main scene of the first interaction. This location is a clear asset for quick and continuous hiring, performed by managers and assistants who currently work in the shops. Mainly, such channels convey implicit criteria of close residence. Medium and large-scale establishments have long opening hours and it is sometimes very complex to commute within Paris and its suburb. In-store channels reflect these constraints, by targeting people from the neighbourhood, who don't face commuting delays and who probably will accept long breaks in a working day and frequent changes in working schedules.

I am used to advertising just at the entrance of the store. Therefore, I am sure people who apply are attending the shopping center, so I am sure they live not too far to the shop. I suppose they will be on time at work and they won't face commuting problems (Store manager, TCH)

The literature emphasizes that social networks rely on neighbourhood and local interactions (Ioannides and Datcher Loury, 2004; McDonald, 2010). From this survey, they are some evidence that walk-in

applications and job adverts in the window/the entrance of the store must be taken into account to highlight the local dimension of hiring and job search processes. In all the cases, the core issue is a close interaction with people from the surroundings. Moreover, employers infer that applying straight to a store is a signal of the applicant's motivation.

We receive a lot of unsolicited resumes; many people give us and don't expect a job advert from Public agencies. They make efforts to find themselves and we find what we want in 95% of the cases in CVs (Store manager, TCH)

Job seekers contribute to build this interaction. Walk-in applications in the local area are a very common way of searching a job in the French retailing. Additionally, from the job seeker's angle, in-store channels improve the chance of meeting a person involved in recruitment. They allow him to boost his probability of accessing to work, by reducing the distance between him and the recruiter, decreasing the potential competition with other applicants. The job seeker can show his motivation and make himself sufficiently available and suitable. The following piece of interview exemplifies these arguments:

I first registered on the FCH1 website. I get a login and password but I thought nobody would reply and nobody did (...). Then, I left a CV at the desk information in the store near to home but I didn't receive response. I had seen the grocery department especially needed workers, therefore, I asked the shop assistants who were handling goods to whom give my CV. They sent me to their manager and I gave him my resume and cover letter. And he said: 'I'll call you'. After one week, ten days without news, I came back, to show my motivation. A few days later he called me to come for an interview. (Sales assistant, Hypermarket, FCH1, student contract, part-time and permanent)

A walk-in application allows the applicant to submit her resume at the right time, to the right person. As McDonald (2010) points out, serendipity must not be neglected in finding a job. It is especially true when there is a great level of turnover to fill part-time, low-wage and low-skilled works, like in retail: 'I had come here by chance; I submitted an unsolicited application and they called me quite immediately' (Shop assistant, supermarket, FCH2, temporary to permanent contract, full-time)

## 2.2. *A screening based on CV, or with a quick word and look?*

In the French retailing, people usually apply for a job by addressing a CV and a cover letter. If recruiters followed the classic method of recruitment described in French Human Resource handbooks (see Cadin et al., 2007), they would sift through these documents and, afterwards, call some candidates for a more or less deep interview. However, the present survey makes clear that the recruitment process

is not so linear. In this respect, it is useful to distinguish written information (CV, cover letter or application form) from spoken information (interview, chat, referrals) and to take into account the way information is conveyed.

When applications are mailed, the content of resumes and cover letter may be used as a filter. In France, these documents usually contain signs about diploma, prior position, work record and socio-demographics attributes, which could be arguments to reject some profiles (Marchal and Rieucou, 2010). People over 55 and the unemployed job seekers, especially those from the public employment agency (Pôle Emploi), are not welcome in the French retailing (Rieucou and Salognon, 2012). They may be rejected through a selection based on resume.

To fill sales-assistant positions (for example in child care department), prejudices about gender also matter in sifting CVs: 'To replenish shelves in make-up department, that's true we never take on men, because fragile products have to be handled, lipsticks, nail polish and so on. Men are awkward with such products' (HR assistant, sifting through CVs, FCH1). Hobbies or misspellings may be bound up with a selection through written criteria. Hobbies especially introduce indirect discrimination.

We have no guideline on training or educational level to recruit, we don't care on diploma, but we require a common level of general knowledge (...). And we will take into account the little column 'others'. I there are original experiences, like investment in civic life, break for a world tour or something like that, we really appreciate. (Headquarter HR Manager, RCH)

When applications are hand-delivered, a casual discussion often directly occurs between the person who brings the application and the person who receives it. The giver could be the applicant himself or a current employee who recommends a friend, an acquaintance, a prior colleague. The recipient could be the store manager or any person involved in the recruitment process. This chat is crucial to save time and its occurrence varies according to the store's size and the autonomy of people with HR responsibilities. It is frequent in supermarkets, toys' and recreation's stores (medium size). In hypermarkets, hand-delivered applications must be gathered at the desk information; as a result, opportunity of a chat is less probable but not impossible. This casual discussion may dramatically change the selection process at the point of entry to employment, because the spoken assessment could mitigate the filtering process based on CV and cover letter. Being unemployed, having no experience in the sector or being over 55 are in balance with a kind and smiling attitude, with a disposition to be available and flexible. A recommendation also gives opportunity to pass the filtering process based on resume.

A person with whom I had worked in this store recommended me his brother for a temporary contract. I have just had look at his CV. I skimmed over, let's me say. It was for a very short period and I really was in a hurry (Store manager assistant, supermarket, FCH2)

Only a few words can enhance a CV and give a candidate a clear advantage to be hired: "A lovely student gave her resume this morning; she is available on Mondays and Tuesdays" (Employee bringing a CV during an interview, FI1). In face-to-face interaction, availability and further schedules are discussed. Selection on attitudes also ranks among filtering criteria in such interaction. Employers surveyed clearly use the embodied attributes to choice workers. They justify their assessment by the weight of appearances and attitudes in customer services oriented jobs. The judgment is sometimes quite radical: a manager surveyed was used to rejecting candidates with soft handshake. Applicants must be well dressed, clean, smiling, with communicative attributes. This selection takes place at the first stage, when an applicant carries herself her CV. Some workers surveyed did not know the convention of being well dressed to bring a speculative application for a job.

### 2.3. *A selection handled by a close employment agency*

HR managers in head-quarters insisted to regard employment agency as a useful intermediary. However, they reported cooperation with public services only in specific occasions, to select staff when a new store was opening or to implement a new recruitment method. In the same vein, employees hardly mentioned public agencies as a job-search or a job-finding method. Stores recruiters widely didn't trust the first selection held by the public employment agency. They had extent prejudices against job seekers from the Pôle Emploi and described them as long-term unemployed, often over 50, without motivation to work: 'There are still people coming from the Pôle Emploi who give a resume and who ask me to put a stamp in order to prove their submitting! Those persons don't seek employment!' (Supermarket manager, FI3)

Most of recruiters surveyed in stores have not notified vacancies to the public agency for ages. Some of them were used to advertising in the Pôle Emploi website. In one case, the store's recruiter (hypermarket, FI1) and the agent of the public office with whom she worked have been interviewed. Both of them were dissatisfied about the partnership. The public's counselor would like to check the job offers in order to avoid discriminatory messages and to be more precise about their contents, by adding indication of wage for instance. The recruiter was distrustful of the way the public agency could modify 'her' own job announcements. Actors disagreed about what they want. To a certain extent they failed to coordinate their actions.

However, in other cases, partnership between employment agency and retailers is better. According to the HR manager of FCH3, cooperation with the Pôle Emploi is easier outside the Parisian region, where the level of the staff turnover is lower and where it is less urgent to recruit. In the North of the France, retailers belonging to this chain and public agents are used to working together and to share the same language and practices. The counselor precisely knows what the retailer is expecting: “He is like us and really looks like one of ours” (HR manager, Head-quarter, FCH3). There is no doubt that applicants from the local employment agency are welcome in these stores. Such close relation can also occur with a private agency. The Temp agencies are not usual hiring channel in the retail sector, because employers generally prefer to use current staff’s flexibility than temporary contracts staff (Carré et al, 2010). Despite that, in one independent supermarket surveyed, the person in charge with recruitment is used to calling a specific employee in a specific Temp agency in Paris. She has just to give a ring to be sure to get a suitable worker a few hours later. She totally trusts the pre-selection done by the Temp agency. The agent and the recruiter manage to agree, the convention is quite a routine.

### **3. When the first interaction is changing**

The ways in which the actors coordinate their actions are not necessarily stable. This third section shall point out how firms, by implementing new devices or methods, are able to modify the information channel and then the filtering criteria which matter in first interactions. Observations have been conducted in the two case studies reported here, in addition to interviews with the main actors (HR managers and assistants, store and department managers, agent in public agency and workers).

#### *3.1. A centralized process which introduces distance between applicants and recruiters*

In one of the leading food retail chain in France (FCH1), a new recruitment process has been gradually implemented for about three years at the date of the survey. In the past, the brand relied on classical methods to fill vacancies in stores: responses to job adverts and direct applications were mainly received in shops; store managers were in charge of the whole recruitment process and in hypermarkets, department managers also used to have a look at the CVs and to meet applicants for a chat or a more formal interview. A central hiring office is now in charge with filling all the jobs of cashiers, storekeepers and sales-assistant in supermarkets and hypermarkets belonging to the chain. Managers in stores are no longer involved in sorting resumes or meeting the applicants who bring them. The new devices and methods have modified the first interaction by introducing distance between applicants and recruiters. Usual practices and conventions of coordination and evaluation were

modified. Prior balance and compromise between actors are quite upsets.

In the central hiring office, the HR assistants are settled in a large open-space office, where the French territory is sub-divided in several geographical areas. Each team performs all the recruitments for one area. The new process is introducing an “at-a-distance” selection. Indeed, all the applications received in shops are scanned and sent to the central office in order to be examined by the HR assistants. The HR assistants also examine speculative applications posted on the website and the applications received in response to job advertisements. As a result, the first screening is now entirely based on CV and cover letters and carried by the HR assistants. To select among applications, they mainly take into account criteria like prior experience in retail, literacy and numeracy knowledge and availability. They are also used to reading the cover letter in order to assess the motivation. After the first sifting, they call the applicants selected for a short interview. This evaluation is supposed to follow a guideline draft by HR managers and to be conducted by video phone or by telephone. Actually, interviews mostly occur on the phone, rather than by video and each HR assistant adapts the guideline in his own way. The third step of the process is conducted in store. Applicants selected by phone must go for an interview at the store for which they have applied or at the store closest to their home and where there is a vacancy. The interaction between demand and supply is now entirely performed by the central hiring office; there is no place for chance or for close and located relationship. Store managers have just to conduct the last interview, in face-to-face. Actually, they have just to accept or to reject the candidate.

The new process does not concern franchised stores. However, FCH1’s headquarter is willing to control job announcements published by franchised stores, in order to avoid discriminatory messages would be associated with the brand. This great reliance on centralization, standardized and written information reflects the wish to settle more professional and objective methods (Wood, 1993) and to avoid discrimination and strong selection based on appearances. It is related with the increasing power of HR staff, as F. Dobbin (1993) suggests in the case of the United-States. To some extent, it reconfigures the role of Human Resource staff, which has much more influence in the recruitment process than in the past. According to one of the interviewed, a department manager, stores managers have mixed points of view about the new methods. On one hand, they enjoy handling fewer tasks, as they are no longer in charge with the first screening. On the other hand, they don’t agree with the HR assistants, who tend to conduct call interviews too hastily.

When the process was launched, it was absolutely unbelievable! According to the candidates they [the central office] sent, the duration of phone interview was just 2 minutes, with question like 'Well, are you



available tomorrow at 10 am? Then, go to this shop and ask for the manager!(Department manager, FCH1)

The on-going standardization may change the profile of the persons hired. With a filtering based on CV and cover letters, unqualified, inexperienced or unemployed persons are disadvantaged. People who live close to the store have fewer opportunities to be aware of job offers. At the opposite, students are at an advantage when competing for positions in this manner. Employers in FCH1 are keen to use student labour because it is relatively cheap and flexible. Furthermore, many students are available for part-time and unsocial working hours, they are perceived to be easily mobile and to have a high level of productivity. This new process may be interpreted as a way to target them.

They're dismissing workers who have been working there for several years and they're taking on students, because we [students] always agree. They asked us to close the store at 11pm on 23th December and we said 'yes'. They asked us to work every Sunday and we said 'yes'. Indeed, we always say 'yes'. (Cashier, FCH1, student contract, part-time and permanent)

Moreover, a short interview conducted on the phone differs from a face-to-face interaction. On the one hand, unfair judgment based on the individual's look is less probable, but on the other hand, phone questions could seem unrealistic. When the interview takes place in store, the applicant is able to improve her knowledge to hold the post, by browsing the departments and by observing the current staff working just before the interview. By contrast, she is not necessarily straight ready for an evaluation when the phone rings. The two following extracts illustrate the limits of an at-a-distance selection.

I was looking for a fish counter assistant, I did a phone call and asked the applicant 'Let me live this specific relationship with the product' and he answered me 'I like fish, what else?' Well, no way! (Assistant HR, FCH1)

When the phone rang, I was in the metro. I totally failed the phone interview. He was asking me 'What are the qualities to be a good cash operator?' – People don't say 'cashier' I don't know why – and I was thinking 'Let me think, Let me think!'(Cashier, FCH1, student contract, part-time permanent)

### 3.2. *An innovative selection method to recruit without resume*

A retail chain specialized in toys (TCH) has experienced another type of changes in its recruitment process. Initially, store managers were quite independent to file low-wages vacancies. The manager interviewed used to hire by a common way: job advertisement in the shop window, followed by a first sift based on CVs and then by a face-to-face interview. He has been involved in the MRS (Méthode de

Recrutement par Simulation” an innovative recruitment initiative, led by the Pôle Emploi and the HR managers in TCH. The principles of the MRS, created in 1996 and developed by the ANPE (Agence Nationale Pour l’Emploi, now Pôle Emploi) are the following: (1) The Pôle Emploi and the managers of the company work together in order to build practical exercises, which reveal abilities workers must have to hold the job (2) The public agency performs a first selection, based on these simulative exercises, without CV. The unemployed who pass the exercises receive a grade (3) The store manager meets the candidates sent by the Pôle Emploi and interviews them without using their CV (4) The HR manager accepts or rejects the store manager's choice.

Actually, by implementing the MRS experience, HR managers in TCH were willing to harmonize the recruitment activities in stores, while the public agency wanted to reduce selectivity against the long-term unemployed. The MRS tries to reduce the distance between the long-term unemployed and the recruiters by highlighting the capacity the formers have to ‘back to work’ and by changing the employers’ views (Salognon, 2007). Through evaluation based on practical exercises, unemployed people enhance their self-confidence and are more likely to get an interview than via a classical sifting through CVs.

During the survey, the store manager has been interviewed before and after his first interview with a candidate addressed by the Pôle Emploi, in the context of the MRS. The candidate was waiting at the entrance of the store and the store manager had a quick look at her. His initial judgment was quite radical: ‘She has the ‘ANPE profile’ because her look is not great; she is especially unwell-dressed. It would be nicer with a person who has a pleasant appearance, it’s obvious!’ (Store manager, TCH). The interview and the previous evaluation based on practical exercises lead this recruiter to revisit his assessment. After the discussion, his judgment is different.

If I had relied on the CV, I would have not even called. You know, people from the ANPE are not exactly applicants we call for an interview (...) But through the simulative exercises, they have displayed abilities for the position. And the tests are very difficult. Here, I am pleasantly surprised, for an ANPE candidate, it was well-done! (Store manager, TCH)

The store manager decides to hire one of the two candidates from the MRS experience, for a part-time and permanent contract. This case highlights that the change has impacted the final recruitment. As Lindsay and Surgeon (2004) point out in the case of Edinburgh, innovative policy in which employment agency is working in partnership with employers may provide useful response to help the long-term unemployed to access to work in the retail sector.

Another meeting between the authors and the store manager in TCH occurred few weeks later. He was satisfied about his recruitment but he did not want to be involved again in such innovative method which is, from his point of view, too time-consuming. Nevertheless, he has learned from this experience. Actually, after the MRS experience, he changed his recruitment practices to fill cashier vacancies during the Christmas holidays. As usual, he advertised in the shop's windows, but he did not read and not sort the resumes he received; he called all the applicants and invited them to come to the shop. He met all the candidates together and gave them a short questionnaire to fill out, with questions like: 'according to you, what is a good check-operator?' Applicants were also asked to complete a practical test, which consisted in counting the content of a cash-register and give change. The first interaction has been totally modified because information about applicants comes from the questionnaire and the outcomes of the practical test, not from the CVs. The store manager has clearly rethought about his usual convention.

I changed my mind about recruitment practices: some candidates I would have hired after an interview and questionnaire have completely failed the practical exercise. Then, I didn't select them. And I took on candidates I would have not select with a screening based on CVs (Store manager, TCH)

Usual conventions to recruit in this store have been impacted by this initiative, which changes the way job seekers and applicants first interact, the information about the quality of the applicants and, therefore, the recruiter's assessment.

## **Conclusion**

This article argues that the first interaction between employers and job seekers is critical for the whole selection process in the French retailing. The first screening conducted by employers varies according to the way information about applications is provided, the format of information and the trust placed on the possible intermediary. One of the added values of this contribution is to improve the current knowledge about direct applications, which are a critical labour market channel, yet not well explored. Differences between walk-in and write-in applications, which do not promote the same screening criteria, may have implications for the understanding of the changes linked to the current recession.

Walk-in applications, as well as job advertisements in the shop window, are used to be a very common job-search method and hiring channel in the French retailing. By bringing their CV straight away to the store, people from the neighbourhood (lone parents for instance), unemployed or unqualified people, can be aware about job offers, they improve their chances of getting an informal chat and then display

their motivation and availability. From the retailers' point of view, such in-stores channels are useful because they prioritize selection criteria based on residence (workers on time, without commuting problems, available for flexible hours) and appearances.

However, the current recession may impact the recruitments practices. Indeed, to reduce hiring costs and manage with a greater number of applications, HR managers tend to implement new devices and to use on-line applications, rather than walk-in applications. By this way, initial interaction and screening criteria are modified. At-a-distance interactions reduce unfair selection based on appearances, which occur in face-to-face, but they carry written and codified information and then prioritize criteria like diploma, current position or work experience. On-line applications could be favorable to students, while unemployed and unqualified people are less advantaged. This way especially fits with current demand for flexible, fragmented and low-wage work in retail.

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