

# **THE VALUE OF A DIPLOMA IN THE RECRUITMENT PRACTICES OF LARGE COMPANIES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Studies show that higher education diplomas make access to well-paid jobs easier and are an important source of prestige and social honor in Brazil. However, there is extensive literature today indicating a reduction in the importance of the diploma in hiring processes and arguing that having a diploma is becoming increasingly less sufficient for getting a job. This article examines the selection processes of recently graduated engineers by eight large companies in the Campinas region. Based on interviews with the main players in these selection processes and on observation of the initial steps of the selection carried out by a consultancy company hired by one of the companies, the study shows that the weight of a diploma from a prestigious university is still the most important variable in the hiring decision, as it defines not only whether it will be possible to get the job or not, but also access to vacancies that lead to better paid and more prestigious managerial positions. Finally, it discusses the theoretical implications as well as what these results suggest in terms of public policies.*

**ENGINEERS – UNIVERSITY DEGREES – EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES – RECRUITMENT**

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The point at which individuals and work positions meet is a fundamental moment in the processes for establishing a social hierarchy in capitalist societies. This is when each individual's greater or lesser degree of participation in the distribution of collectively produced material and symbolic wealth in any given society is defined.

This allows the labor market to be conceived of as a machine that classifies and judges the social value of individuals every time a candidate is selected for a work position. For this reason, labor force selection processes may constitute a privileged object for studying the perceptions and values that guide the definition of the value of a person in a given society.

The research that gave rise to this text focused on how highly valued the education to which recently graduated engineers had had access was at the time they were being selected for a job.

By emphasizing education in this study we are discussing how a principle of social hierarchy operates in societies that have an education system. As is well known, the relationship between a work position and academic credentials is the subject of extensive literature. One strand in these studies shows that in different countries there is a positive correlation between years of schooling and salaries; in Brazil, for example, economists say that this is particularly strong (Birdsall, Sabot 1996; Barros, Mendonça, 1995; Menezes Filho, 2001). Furthermore, some pieces of work show that this positive correlation is not linear, but progresses more rapidly at those times that correspond to receiving a diploma, i.e., a certificate that is awarded at the conclusion of a particular education level (Menezes Filho, 2001). This seems to indicate that the labor market has recourse to mechanisms for evaluating the value of the employee that is diploma-centered, which leads to income inequality between individuals.

Other studies show that higher education course diplomas in this country are a source of prestige and social honor that is expressed in terms that go beyond income, to the point of even guaranteeing special treatment on the part of the State justice system (Cury, Nogueira, 2001)<sup>1</sup>.

We are also discussing the way in which social hierarchy is linked to the processes whereby inequality is transmitted between generations. In the classic studies of social

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<sup>1</sup> See also in Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1994) and Raymundo Faoro (1987) the precocious association between diplomas and careers that lead to positions of Power. See, for a more recent period, Maria Rita Loureiro (1997) and Luciano Martins (1985).

stratification that were produced in the 1960s (Blau, Duncan, 1967; Sewell, Hallen, Portes, 1969), for example, the moment of first employment is considered to be a moment of transition from school to the labor market, a fundamental step in “making the individual’s status autonomous” of that of their family. This is the moment to enforce the material and symbolic investments made in previous stages of socialization. Although subsequent studies have slightly altered this perception, showing that in most industrialized countries the transition is not so “clean”, since young people experience comings and goings between school and the labor market (Kerckhoff, 1995), the fact remains that the processes for entering a work position at the end of a cycle of studies reveal, in a particularly concrete way, the interactions that exist between school and the labor market and their contribution to the inter-generational transmission of social inequality<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, while income inequality associated with school credentials is more commonly measured by economists as inequality between individuals, it more properly corresponds to inequality between social groups.

Recently, however, various studies that take as their subject the functioning of the contemporary labor market, and particularly the relationships between education and work, have stated that the higher education diploma, although important is increasingly less sufficient for obtaining a qualified work position (Jackson, 2001, Lazuech, 2000). This diagnosis also applies to Brazil (Régnier, 2007, Paiva, Cavalheiros, Potengy, 2003).

Obviously, what is in play in this discussion is not the importance of the diploma, but the information it holds, .i.e. what it indicates about who has a diploma and who can put it across in a recruitment and selection process. The argument developed by these authors considers the hypothesis that the recent changes that have occurred in production, considering the notion of “production restructuring”, have brought about changes in the definition of the necessary worker. In addition to, or even instead of, a specific technical qualification it is now expected that the worker presents a certain dexterity for adapting to a world in constant transformation, a capability that is not included in the formative package offered by the education system. In this new scenario, the hierarchy of the structure of employment is detached from the hierarchy of the education system and all diplomas are considered similar, since they indicate little about the new attributes expected of the candidates<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> With regard to this, see also Hasenbalg (2003).

Amplifying this viewpoint, if not at the origin of it, are the professionals who work in the Human Resources area – HR – in companies and/or consultancy firms. Both in the information they pass on to sociologists (Régner, 2007 and Lazuech, 2000), as well as in the literature they produce (Amaral, 2004) and in the talks they give in universities about the recruitment processes used by the companies in which they work, these professionals mobilize notions like “leadership”, “flexibility”, and “competitiveness”, among others, to describe the basic individual skills needed for obtaining a qualified position. They generally make it clear that a diploma is something that is increasingly less decisive when it comes to hiring someone.

Research into practices for recruiting recently-graduated engineers consisted in examining how they are assessed when they look for employment in large companies. More precisely, we tried to identify the qualities that are valued by employers; to check the way in which such qualities are assessed at the time of recruitment; and finally, to examine the role played by the diploma in this whole process. To do so, we interviewed the main players in recruitment in eight large companies in the Campinas<sup>4</sup> region and we monitored the first rounds of recruitment for engineers that was carried out by a consultancy firm, which was working for one of the companies involved in the study<sup>5</sup>. The research dealt mainly with the recruitment of trainees, a group from which fulltime professionals will be chosen<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The spreading of this perception, as shown by Catani, Oliveira and Dourado (2000), has affected the way in which universities devise their courses, ushering in an era of “curricular reformism” (p. 13).

<sup>4</sup> The choice of companies was based on a survey of professors and students on engineering courses at the State University of Campinas – *Unicamp* – about the main companies that employed former students. From those mentioned eight were chosen, with an attempt being made to vary the sectors in which they operate. As a result, the group studied includes companies that work in the automotive, chemical, electrical, electronic and telephone sectors. Two companies that operate only in R&D in the telecommunications area were also included. The names of the companies have been omitted and the names of the individuals have been changed. Some terms that refer directly to the managerial style of the company, and that would, therefore, allow for it to be identified, have also been modified.

<sup>5</sup> The stages observed comprised a group dynamics exercise carried out in the consultancy firm itself and a presentation by the candidates, in which they talked about themselves (name, age, course, school, parents’ professions, number of siblings, professional experience, area of interest and availability for work). To take part in this stage of the process the candidates had already registered their résumés and done the online English test. At the end of these stages, more or less ten candidates were chosen who underwent the company’s group

## HOW AN ENGINEER IS HIRED FOR THE INITIAL POSITIONS

It has to be recognized that successfully hiring someone is not necessarily something simple, since candidate assessment is carried out under fairly artificial circumstances, divorced from the challenges, pressures and urgency of those day-to-day practices that are independent of the relationships that define the social fabric of the company in which the candidate is going to work. Nevertheless, labor contracts are entered into on a fairly regular basis, showing that both companies and candidates consider themselves to be sufficiently satisfied with the situation to engage in a relationship which they intend to be long-lasting.

Presuming that companies have little interest in bearing the costs of any possible “assessment errors” committed at the time of hiring, the regular signing of labor contracts at the end of the selection process seems to indicate that they have the capacity to identify the most suitable candidates for the work positions.

How is this adjustment achieved? What tools do selection processes resort to in order to define the most suitable candidates for a work position?

Within the sphere of qualified work positions, it is known that educational credentials are fundamental elements in the assessment through which the candidate for a vacancy goes in the selection process. Initially, credentials seem to be a separating instrument, used on the whole group of individuals who are looking for employment. They define the individuals who can be considered legitimate candidates for the vacancy in those cases in which companies expressly and explicitly ask they should have concluded some level of education or undergone some specific educational preparation. Subsequently, credentials may be, and

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dynamics exercise. Those selected in this stage – three at most – were be interviewed by the engineering manager who was charged with making the final section.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to explain that in this scenario focusing on engineers meant studying processes for entering and remaining in dominant social positions, since we are here dealing with a profession that is very prominent in the Brazilian labor market, occupying a position that has remained unshaken for some decades. As various studies on managing groups in Brazil show (Grün, 1995; Medeiros 2003), engineers are still among the highest paid professionals in Brazil, despite economic crises and changes in the production structure. This perception of the social position occupied by engineers in Brazilian society also appears in the discourse in the press, which regularly documents the privileged position they occupy within the hierarchy of companies (Weimberg, 2003, p. 76; Lima, 2004, p.44; *Mano*, 2005, p.20). Furthermore, by limiting the study to the case of recent graduates meant defining a dimension by which the population of candidates studied could be uniformized, thus allowing for greater efficiency when comparing the assessments to which they would be submitted.

often are, taken as documents or indicators of the qualities of the candidates for work positions.

To reply to the question about the place of school credentials in the selection process of engineers it is necessary to understand exactly how the latter are assessed. To do so it is important to examine how the process develops. This will allow us to identify those responsible at each stage, which in turn reveals that the different professionals involved do not define the characteristics they are looking for in professionals in the same way.

The stages for hiring a recently-graduated engineer are very similar in the companies selected for this study and do not depend on the sector in which they operate. This is both true when they themselves carry out the recruitment and selection process and when they delegate it, at least in part, to specialist consultancy companies<sup>7</sup>.

Statements from the main recruitment players reveal a distribution of responsibilities between the two groups involved: the Human Resources professionals and the engineering managers. Both groups describe the process as one of collaboration, based on the complementarity that exists between the specific competences of the different professionals involved.

The first phase of recruitment consists in defining, as accurately as possible, the profile of the desired professional. This is done by the person responsible for the area that has created the vacancy. In the case of those companies here being focused on, the person responsible for this stage is always an engineering manager, as William, head of production engineering at company A explains:

... first we send the requirements to the recruitment [sector] to put together a description of the profile we want. [...] He says: I want an engineer who has a such-and-such a profile. Depending on the project, I may say that he must speak fluent German, something like that, for example; have done traineeship programs in some similar area; have an interest in working with people, like

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<sup>7</sup> Although it is outside the scope of this work, it is important to note that this coincidence in recruitment methods is not natural, but the result of the initiative adopted in companies of a specific type – those linked to major multinational corporations – and that have a particular type of work position – qualified, but at the initial phase in the career. For a discussion about the variation in recruitment processes that focuses on the company's sector and size, the type of work position on offer and the gender composition of the work force, see Peter Marsden (1994).

working with production - it's going to depend a lot on which area you're going to go to into....  
(research interview, Campinas, June 2005)

After this stage, the selection process is publicized in the media, which may, in certain cases, include talks in some universities.

This is when the registration period begins. This is generally done over the Internet and consists in filling in a form or registering the résumé on the website of the company or consultancy firm hired to carry out that particular selection process. Then, the candidates have an online English test and in some cases a logical reasoning test. All companies analyzed said that language was the first filter in the selection process.

... it's *sine qua non*; today, almost 100% of the [*trainee*] programs ask for it [a second language]. Language is a filter. Just the language part floors more than 50% of the people. They ask for advanced knowledge to being fluent; I mean they're people who have to know how to communicate and write...  
(Soraia, psychologist – president of Consultoria Gama; research interview, Vinhedo, 2005)

After the language test comes the group dynamics and interview stage. Of all the selection processes studied the only companies that do not have a group dynamics exercise are those involved with R&D<sup>8</sup>.

Group dynamics exercises are accompanied by all the professionals who take part in the recruitment process, i.e. the professionals from Human Resources and the engineering managers who defined the vacancy. They vary a little, according to the company or consultancy firm. Basically, a case is presented to the group of candidates, which at this point in time is divided into groups of, on average, 15 individuals. The case is a problem to be solved collectively. Based on the interaction that is established by the participants in their efforts to solve the problem, elements are sought for evaluating, above all, the capacity of the candidate to adapt to the function. What is favored is what HR professionals call “behavioral competences”. At the end of this stage, which may comprise one, two or, more rarely, three rounds of the dynamics, three candidates, on average, are chosen for the final interview.

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<sup>8</sup> In their statements the Human Resources professionals of these companies justify giving up group dynamics, by saying that “people involved with research don't do well in dynamics exercises. They get bored” (Cecília, business manager, in-house HR consultant with Research Institute B; research interview, Campinas, 2005).

... group dynamics is normally a situation which perhaps the professional may come up against in his day-to-day routine — a business experience — and it looks at what the person's posture's like when faced with that problem and when it's solved in the group. Normally, the cases are very complex and demand a good evaluation on the part of the candidates, OK? And the trainee, through his performance in the process, is going to show if he's competent, or not. It's an assessment of competences so that he can move on to the next step in the process. That's the way we select those who're going to the final stage. It's going to demand a technical analysis of the situation, of course, but it's a very subjective process [...]. It's much more the behavior itself ... (Verônica, business manager, HR analyst for Company A; research interview, Campinas, 2005)

After the group dynamics round, the number of candidates is already considerably reduced. Then the last step in the recruitment process takes place. This consists in an interview with the engineering manager who requested the vacancy. At this stage the criteria are perceived in an even more subjective way, as this professional explains:

...after the dynamics exercise there's a personal interview. I say, I liked that one, that one and that one and so I bring them here to the area and I show them what we can offer them. I show them the work they're going to do, what is expected of them and then I ask them if they feel empathy with the area and if they can see themselves working in this job. Then ... I look for the sparkle in their eyes. I think that a large part of it is the sparkle in their eyes... (William, engineer, head of production engineering at Company A)

The selection process, as described by our informants, really does not seem to leave any room for evaluating the origin of the diploma of the candidates, focusing as it does on so-called behavioral competences. So far, everything seems to indicate that the diploma serves essentially as an instrument for separating those who have concluded a higher education course in engineering from those who have not.

Does this mean that all diplomas are the same? It was this question that allowed us to understand an important, unspoken aspect of recruitment processes: there is a prior selection, which is euphemized or even denied by HR professionals. The engineering managers are fairly open about this. One of them explained to us that the assessment of candidates is largely based on subjective features:

...[I don't worry about the technical evaluation because] I imagine that for a person who's spent six hours a day in a college for five years there's no way, even if it's by osmosis, he didn't pick up



something. That's why I choose a top notch college, because I know that even if he didn't want to, he learned something, unlike in a university where he spends three hours a night and where, however much he wants to learn he's not going to... (William, engineer, head of production engineering at Company A)

At what moment, however, do people "choose a top notch college", as mentioned by the engineering manager?

According to those interviewed, this option is taken at the time the "vacancy profile" is being put together, at the first stage of the recruitment process. This is a specific verbal instruction that is not formally stated in the publicity material. A way of implementing it is to ask HR professionals to give their publicity talks about vacancies in selected universities.

According to those interviewed, this is a demand made by the engineering managers, which is, in fact, heavily resisted by most of the HR professionals:

The leading-edge universities that they [engineers] are thinking about are the public universities, right? The HR people are a bit against talking about... talking about that... what a leading-edge college is... Because we really don't believe it. Because we're talking about human beings. If he's got this far then we leave it open. We don't like to put labels on people. (Fatima, psychologist, HR specialist in Company C; research interview, 2004)

So, although the recruitment process is described as something essentially collaborative, with a fairly consolidated distribution of the roles, functions and places of each group of professionals and, at least apparently, based on an agreement about the specific competence of each one, this perception does not stand up to a more detailed examination that reveals recruitment to be a boxing ring, in which the professionals fund themselves in very different corners.

## **RECRUITMENT AS A BOXING RING: HR VS. ENGINEERS**

Discourses about diplomas explain the clash that occurs between engineering managers and HR professionals. In recruitment there are two contradictory and concurrent discourses:

A diploma simply shows that the person has done a higher education course and is ready to take part in a development program for young people. If he did it [degree course] at Unicamp, whether he did.... it's often not even looked at... (Soraia, psychologist, president of Consultoria Gama)

The power of a diploma is decisive in the selection process. The person who is here [at Unicamp] worked hard to get in; it's not just the name, but what this represents in the history of someone's life, having gone through this university, if only because of the level of demand it imposes. The discourse of the people from HR [disqualifying the importance of the diploma] is centered on what is politically correct... (Rogério, electrical engineer, president of Company D; research interview, 2005)

So, on the one hand, the HR professionals refuse to use the university of origin of the candidates as an indicator of their quality, favoring the so-called individual competences, as measured by group dynamics exercises and interviews. On the other, the engineering managers say they attribute great importance to the origin of the diploma, using it as an indicator of the value of the candidate when compared with that of his competitors. Let us see how this more precisely manifests itself in practice.

## **A WORLD WITHOUT FRONTIERS: HR PROFESSIONALS AND INDIVIDUAL COMPETENCES**

The discourse of human resource professionals is strongly anchored in what they call the “competences” of the candidates. These are never clearly defined and are definitely not technical. As will be seen, they refer to a fairly broad set of skills and characteristics.

Soraia, founder, owner and president of a medium-size recruitment consultancy firm, can be considered to be one of the most mobilized spokespeople when it comes to defending the prioritization of behavioral aspects in recruitment processes in detriment to technical aspects. She has a degree in Psychology from the United Metropolitan Schools – *FMU* –, and exemplifies the position adopted by other HR professionals interviewed. She categorically states that the origin of the university diploma “is no longer taken into consideration in selection processes”.

The subject is dealt with in her book<sup>9</sup> about how to give people guidance at the beginning of their careers, in which she argues that in the first half of the 1990s the value of a person's résumé was fundamentally based on the college they had studied at. Therefore, studying at a first class college was practically a guarantee of getting fulltime employment for anyone. According to Soraia, over time companies began to notice that the people coming out of these colleges were very intelligent, but had other types of difficulty, mainly as far as concerns relationships with other people, both colleagues and subordinates. On the other hand, average students, who considered school as just another moment in life, had the opportunity to develop important behavioral skills, because, as she said in the interview, "universities make people stupid when it comes to behavioral issues".

...universities were worried about [...] being up-to-date as far as technical content was concerned, but did not get up-to-date with regard to the way to give lessons, the methodology of giving lessons. [...] teaching methods remained the same. So, what did they do? The professors, PhDs, Masters, post-doctoral teachers, the owners of knowledge get there and hand you a bibliography, material for you to study to get good marks. Few of them help you build up your reasoning power, or have you question why something is done in that way. So it leaves the student in an extremely pacific factor [*sic*], from just receiving... (Research interview, 2005)

Also according to Soraia, at a certain moment in the 1990s, companies noticed that "it was easier to teach technical subjects, like performance chemistry and basic financial mathematics than determination, toughness, initiative and other things". That is why she believes that such companies stopped concerning themselves with the origin of the diploma, since all, or almost all, universities were capable of teaching these technical competences. The difficulty was in finding people with the competences necessary for interacting in the working environment. Hence, the importance assumed by the human resources department and the specific working methodology developed by them, "competence-based people management". All this caused fundamental changes in the recruitment area:

...it changed when people started saying: I value more what a person is as a human being, the behavioral competences he brings with him, the human skills he has and I'll develop his technical abilities; I'll teach him. Because there at Unicamp he's undoubtedly going to learn chemical engineering, fine

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<sup>9</sup> To avoid identifying the professional the book will not be cited in this work.

chemistry, except that if he did fine chemistry I'm going to have to teach him our specialty of how soap is made, [...] I'm going to have to start off by teaching him how to make soap and I'll teach him a little more than fine chemistry, because universities also often teach things wrongly! It's because the professors are often academics that have never seen the world of work and sometimes what it is in theory is not the same as it is in practice. So that means that there has been a revolution in the labor market and today, generally speaking, whether we're hiring a president or a trainee, what is most taken into consideration are their behavioral competences and therefore the university with a fancy name, whether it's a first category or fifth category school, has lost its importance. This all came along at the same time as the issue of globalization. With globalization, a second language, which was already valued before, is much more valued now. So today, if I know how to build relationships, if I know how to argue, if I have an analytical capability and if I know how to speak English then I'm on an equal footing with any student. A student who worked hard to get into Unicamp is going to compete with a student from the worst university here in Campinas or Brazil. Because of the Internet we had 27,500 people registering — people from all over Brazil; from Manaus to Chuí; even Brazilians who aren't living in Brazil, who are at university abroad. So, labor market opportunities have been globalized... (research interview, 2005)

The competences listed are social. Although they are described in psychological vocabulary that treats them as “human skills”, they are social competences that allow people to establish good relationships with bosses, colleagues and subordinates; they are intellectual capabilities, relating to argument and analysis; they all result from a learning process that, unlike what the HR professionals say they believe, are not randomly distributed among the different social groups. HR professionals are aware that there is a difference between their perception and that of the engineering managers:

This is the language used by engineers, colleges, leading-edge universities and it's been breaking down a little recently because we're seeing it in practice, aren't we? Because they're older people; the older engineers studied in the so-called leading-edge universities. And as for behavior, no comment. You get younger people, or those from another university, and they're studying hard there and they've grown, haven't they?" (Fatima, psychologist, an HR specialist in Company C; research interview, 2004)

Although refusing to employ the technical competence discourse of the engineering managers, the HR professionals are unable to deny the strong social selectivity that exists in recruitment and selection processes. This does not happen so much when they acknowledge the importance of the English test, but when they discuss its implications. It is in the discussion about language that the recruitment game appears in all its cruelty:

...starting with the assumption that everyone already comes with the language skill, then undoubtedly competences speak more loudly in the selection process, because language is a prerequisite. If he [the candidate] has a second language, then OK, he's going to be part of the process; between someone who knows a third language and someone who has more suitable behavior he [recruiter] is going to look to the person who has the behavior. It's preferable, therefore, but not compulsory that a student from another university participates in the process. What we see is... like... and this is strictly between you and me, a person who was educated at Unicamp, for example, already has a structure and comes with the language skills. What often happens [is] that those who work and study at night sometimes end up having no time to get the qualifications they need to satisfy this language issue. So... at the time of the process it's a bit... I think that the question is one of priority... it's more centered on the question of language, isn't it, than on the educational background. But it's just that it ends up coming out alright... (Verônica, business administrator, HR analyst at Company A)

This is the social selection aspect that the engineers have little difficulty in recognizing.

## **THE STRENGTH OF HIERARCHY: ENGINEERING MANAGERS AND TECHNICAL COMPETENCE**

It is not surprising that the starting points of engineers from the same companies when it comes to discussing recruitment and selection are very different. The engineering manager from Company B, for example, although he says that he attributes great importance to the behavior of candidates, explains that this issue is only a criterion when they have been screened by reference to the origin of their diploma.

...[behavior] is the differential today. Everybody has a product, everybody has qualities, everybody has a service to offer. Behavior is a factor that differentiates people; it's the differential. Interpersonal relations... today, this is considered a very important factor for making customers loyal... The person is studying at a good university, of the likes of Unicamp, or the University of São Carlos, right? ...the Federal University of São Carlos. And so we already know that he's someone who's very well-educated. So, like, we don't have many concerns about having to evaluate this person technically. The personal side, the behavioral side is very much more important. This behavioral side is going to facilitate him working alongside the people here better, so everything depends on the relationship itself; that's very strongly dealt with in the interviews... it's because we already choose some universities, don't we? Like Unicamp, the University of São Carlos and that's what we think. If he comes from a university... it's already perceived that he's suitable for exercising this type of function or of having this knowledge. In actual fact we [therefore] evaluate much more his equilibrium, the relationship factor, his

creativity for getting out of embarrassing situations, his ability to be flexible and adaptable. That's very important, very important... (Lauro, engineer, operations manager of Company B)

Despite the selection process being open "to everyone", one of the engineering managers explains that the entry of students coming from private universities

...is recent, the recruitment company itself [...] began to look at good résumés, began submitting them to us, started calling up and the whole business grew, but in engineering specifically, in engineering I've not seen anybody from the area of... Students have come [from private universities] to take part in the process, but as far as I know none of them have become full employees yet. (Alexandre, engineer, coordinator of maintenance engineering for Company C)

## **AN EXEMPLARY CASE**

In a clearer and more direct way the engineer interviewed from Company A provides an example of the association between diplomas and possible career paths within the company. This is the case of two recently-graduated engineers.

...we have cases, for example, of recently-graduated engineers who were given an opportunity in the production area. They were supervisors; they had been operatives [in the company], and they did an engineering course. So, those types of people normally already have a certain affinity with some stage in the process and so, when a vacancy becomes available in this same department, in this area, we use them, of course. [...] At other times we get someone who graduated right now at the beginning of... at the end of the year, right? He was a trainee for six months and was educated at a first class university, there at USP in São Carlos. He spoke fluent English and German and he came here to help us develop a productivity system. Except that in these two months he even developed the relationship part, that attitude thing that was so strong that when a vacancy came up in January in another product area, in our same area, all his work colleagues came in here and said – hire so-and-so because he's capable, he speaks two languages, he's got a good educational background, he's just what we need – in fact, it's three languages, isn't it? Because he speaks, German, English and Portuguese and he [was] different from many recently-graduated engineers who need to gain their space. In March he went to Germany and stayed there a month with other colleagues on company business and all his colleagues indicated him, even the oldest people indicated him, saying that he should be the person to go. (William, engineer, head of production engineering in Company A)

When questioned about the principal reason for the difference in the career path in the company between a person who came from the production line and the trainee from USP, he replied:

...I think that a person who... who studies at a public university already has a different educational background. If we were to do some research... This is not being prejudiced, but that person had better opportunities in life than the others who studied at university at night. So, all this is part of their educational background, what we talked about, attitude, capacity-building and behavior. Attitude is not something that happens by chance; it's a whole life's story, and the advantage of a person who studied in the university at night and was already working in the company, is that they have a lot of specific knowledge and sometimes, in the end, what's missing is that grounding of someone who studied fulltime at university, someone who studied in a good technical university. So, I think I'm taking a risk by saying it but I'm going to say it anyway, that when you hire a person who is making his career within the company and, for some social misfortune that person studies at university at night, then they have a more finite life than the other. In any place, in any place whatsoever, the tendency is to grow, to develop and other things... The tendency – it's not a rule, but it's a tendency – is that he's not going to manage to offer a whole lot more, while someone who studies at a first class university has a whole different social basis. I think he'll manage to get better results.

As can be seen, an analysis of the discourse of these professionals allows the opposite positions in which they find themselves in the recruitment processes to be explained. It is possible, however, to understand where each one of them is coming from without spending too long also poring over the ambiguities and the gaps the interviews reveal. This is the way, for example, that the owner and president of Consultoria Gama, after stating categorically that there is an inexorable change in the perception of the qualities of candidates, sums it up with disarming frankness: "I consider myself to be a person who, if I'd entered the labor market today, would not be approved for a trainee program because I don't speak fluent English and because I didn't study at a top notch university".

In this case the positions are not only opposite, but also correspond to a hierarchy that is associated with the power differentials that materialize in recruitment, because the engineering managers have the prerogative of defining both the profile of the vacancy at the beginning of the process as well as the candidate that is to be hired at the end.

In the first place the statements allow it to be seen that candidate selection provides a bi-dimensional definition of the qualities expected of the individual to be hired, favoring both technical and social competences, which are sometimes perceived or labeled as behavioral.

Secondly, they allow the perception that these two dimensions of competences are closely connected and that each selection mechanism that is used throughout the recruitment process has a simultaneous impact on both dimensions. So, for example, in the words of one of the HR professionals, the proof of “advanced” English may function like an instrument for attracting students coming out of the more prestigious, public universities, in which the best technicians are formed, but also where they train and educate those people who, right from their early childhood, had been immersed in family environments that are capable of producing a series of competences that are appreciated by companies, like the capacity and possibility of thinking like a leader, and the willingness to organize their future as a project that demands investments in the present and, consequently, leaves them able to concentrate on results, among other things.

The association between technical competence and social competence is not accidental, but is the result of the specific institutional arrangement that governs the distribution of educational opportunities among the different groups in Brazilian society.

As the place where English is learned is not a regular school, whether public or not, but an independent private course and, since we are talking of an advanced level of language mastery, particularly of the possibility of an interchange during either school or university years, access to this competence, which might be perceived as just a technique, ends up being reserved for those whose family and/or personal history has prepared them for thinking of such an investment as interesting and who, at the same time, can bear its cost.

This causes, therefore, a chain reaction: select on the basis of the person’s skill in speaking and writing well in English implies favoring recently-graduated young people from public universities. This, in turn, implies selecting people coming out of private, more selective high schools, to which only those who were born in families that have economic and symbolic resources capable of guiding them in this direction have access. All this reveals the social selection that is in play in the most objective and rational recruitment and selection processes.

In the following section we discuss the principles that guide the positions adopted by HR professionals and engineering managers with regard to this form of candidate assessment.

## **MULTIPLE OPPOSITIONS**



So far we have tried to show that the interactions between HR professionals and engineering managers end up producing a selection situation that is characterized essentially by a strong conservative bias toward the *status quo*. As we have seen, this is not the result of an agreement between the recruitment players, since during analysis of the interviews it became apparent that the recruitment process is marked by differentiation between the points of view of the professionals involved. Rather than being just differentiation, however, this is establishing a hierarchy that is linked to the social and professional characteristics of those involved. These characteristics are structured as multiple, but interlinked opposites, which is expressed in three dimensions: the profession and occupation of the professionals interviewed (engineering managers vs. psychologists/administrators); the university of origin (first class vs. second rate); and finally, gender (men vs. women).

As far as concerns the characteristics of the recruitment professionals, it is noticeable that in the eight companies studied there is a predominance of psychologists, with business administrators being more rarely found: “my manager is a psychologist, my supervisor is a psychologist. In this particular career area and in recruitment and selection we’re all psychologists...” (Gláucia, psychologist, career planning, HR; research interview, Campinas, 2005).

The opposition here is not so much between Psychology/Business Administration and Engineering, but between Psychology and Business Administration in the shape of the Human Resources professional and the engineer. Although there is no specific research about the establishment of hierarchies in professional groups, we know that in Psychology courses working in the human resources area is a less prestigious career option. This appears in the perceptions of Psychology students themselves (Bastos et al. 2005), but may also be gauged by the total, or almost total, absence of specific training and education programs on the Psychology courses of the most prestigious universities, which concentrate on preparing people for working in the clinical area.

Furthermore, the psychologists and administrators from our sample were educated in the same private universities considered in this universe as being “second rate” and received no type of specific training to operate in the Human Resources area during their undergraduate studies. Only one of them had done a Master of Business Administration degree – MBA – at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation.

All the engineers, on the other hand, work in the prestigious area of the profession and have been educated in those public universities considered to be “top notch”.

These oppositions, in turn, are associated with a gender relationship: while most of the psychologists are women, the engineers were predominantly men. It would appear to be no accident that the salaries publicized in the specialist press are higher for project managers and operations managers, positions held by the engineers we interviewed, and smaller for personnel and Human Resource managers, positions held by the female psychologists and administrators.

As can be seen, the moment of selection of each new candidate is also the moment when the professionals, enmeshed in a symbolic struggle to impose their own specific competence, and therefore, their place in the company, confront each other. On the labor market side it is the daily result of the confrontation that, in large part, defines the opportunities that young, recently-graduated people find there.

## **WHAT IS LEARNED FROM STUDYING RECRUITMENT PROCESSES**

The opposition that exists between the professionals who take part in the selection process (engineering managers *vs.* HR professionals) indicates that, on the one hand, HR professionals seem to act, or are compelled to act, even though they are not aware of it, as a mechanism for smoothing out the conflicts surrounding the democratization of education, in an attempt to invert a symbolic hierarchy that places them in a secondary position in this context (Grün, 1995). Shielded by the supposed “science” of recruitment, supported by their diplomas in Psychology and Business Administration, brandishing their alleged technical capacity to define who is suitable or otherwise to operate in the social space that is the company, psychologists construct what appears to be a post-modern mythology about the functioning of the labor market – denying what passes in front of their very own eyes: the fact that the brand of the diploma opens and closes doors in companies; that it is an indicator of social competence rather than of technical competence. In this way they contribute to selling the illusion of perfect social mobility, that of the country of opportunities, to a population that in their daily lives experiences one of the highest rates of inequality in the world.

This discourse of apparent equality of opportunities in an environment of profound and long-lasting inequality provides a margin for some hypotheses that are worth exploring in

a broader piece of research. One of them is that the discourse of HR professionals can only be as it is because it constitutes the result of a collective strategy for reconverting the diplomas themselves, a strategy that originated in the inflation processes of school certificates. Excluded, because of the little value attributed to their school credentials, these professionals had the opportunity to use them in a labor market space that, in the logic of their professions, is subordinate although expanding.

In this case, in the sample of companies that specialize in this work, it is interesting to question the absence of HR professionals who were educated in the so-called first class universities. Is this mere coincidence or does it reveal a more general situation? Taking advantage of the transformations in the way that work is managed in this phase of capitalism, the devalued diploma may, despite all this, constitute a collective mechanism of protection, to the extent that the power of the diploma is collective and cannot be individually challenged (Bourdieu, Boltanski, 1998).

In turn, the engineers, armed with a diploma that, in an unquestionable way in this particular environment, guarantees their technical and social competence, do not explain how much they use the diploma for assessing a competence that is as social as it is technical. Believing they are guaranteed by, or trying to guarantee themselves with a title that is considered first class and that guarantees they are competent, if not in fact, then undoubtedly by right (Bourdieu, Boltanski, 1998), these engineers end up playing an active role in reproducing their own situation over time, by prioritizing recently-graduated engineers in the selection processes who have school qualifications that have the same “value” as their own. They justify this practice by associating a certain number of material and symbolic benefits to going to particular universities. In this process they end up establishing “a non-explicit struggle that aims to impose the principle of legitimate excellence” on recruitment practices (Grün, 1995).

Examination of this issue offers, therefore, productive clues for thinking about the way in which diplomas and job positions relate, the nominal that hides the true disparity, thereby explaining some of the elements that underlie the contribution the school makes in reducing inequality. The fact that daily micro-interactions allow us to translate the hierarchy of schooling into social hierarchy reveals the more general process by which education can become a producer of inequality (including of income), although in a very different sense from that thought of by the theory of human capital.

This allows us to understand better what is at play in the current discussion about the expansion of higher education in Brazil, particularly as far as concerns the ambiguity of the implications of any possible decision for supporting this expansion by diversifying supply.

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