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### Attention Profile: A New Recruitment Criterion

Attention is among the important elements jointly making up the characteristics of cognitive processes. The "attention-based view of the firm" has been created on the basis attention selectivity and limitations. It looks at an organization's mass attention as its most valuable resource, with proper management as a source of competitive advantage and organizational success. Such an approach should also be applied in recruitment and the attention profile should be incorporated into worker selection criteria. Thus, it is sensible and justified to attract managers with an attention profile in line with requirements facing the given organization. This paper develops the foundations for a coupling of attention management with recruitment and opens the door to further theoretical consideration, empirical research, and practical application of this concept in the company.

#### Introduction

Many selection criteria are used in the recruitment of managerial staff. They include the candidate's education and professional experience, personality, talents, and character traits. The pedigree of these criteria usually makes reference to concepts of a lucid organizational order, the paradigm of an objective, clear role structuring, and relatively stable management conditions. At the same time, it has been a known fact for years that it is extremely difficult to achieve such an ideal combination of circumstances. Turbulent surroundings, chaos, action, and change of targets are a manager's day-to-day fare. It is for this reason that instead of qualification criteria, competency criteria have been introduced, the set of which is subject to modification and supplementing. Novelties from the theory of management are also used as inspiration in the process of choosing selection criteria. One of them is the *attention-based view of the firm* [Ocasio, 1997]. This concept treats an organization's mass attention as its most valuable resource, where its proper management is a source of competitive advantage and organizational success. This ap-

proach necessitated incorporating attention management among worker competency selection criteria. Attracting managers to a company whose attention profile agrees with the requirements forwarded by the organization seems sensible and justified. Thus, what is necessary is the development of methods of assessing candidate skills in the area of managing a strictly limited resource—the attention, both the candidate’s own and that of the organization. In entrusting managers with a portion of human resources, they also receive a valuable resource in the form of subordinates, where workers share the attention of their superiors by 70% [Davenport, Beck, 2001].

This paper is intended to bring greater familiarity to questions of managing attention in an organization as well as developing basic principles for introducing a competency involving attention management among the set of recruitment criteria. The authors are perfectly aware of the inadequacy of referring to the concept of an *attention-based view of the firm* as the more Polish “attention management,” but for lack of indigenous tradition in the area of nomenclature appropriate for this approach, this linguistically clumsy and somewhat unfaithful, albeit shorter phrase, does in fact express the essence of the concept. At the same time, any suggestions in this realm will be greatly appreciated.

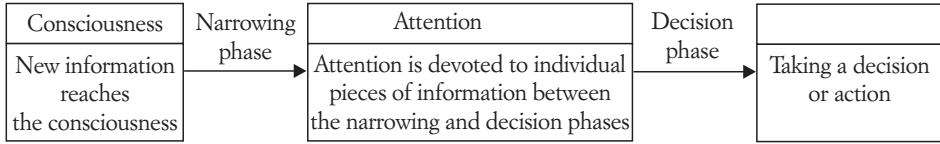
The first part of this paper consists of basic information on the idea of attention management. The further section looks at possibilities of its application in the process of composing worker selection criteria.

### **The Importance of Attention in a Person’s Behavior**

Attention is one of the significant elements forming the characteristics of cognitive processes. T. H. Davenport and J. C. Beck [2001] define attention as follows: Attention is mental involvement focused on a concrete thing or information. Various objects reach our consciousness. We concentrate on some and take decisions as to whether or not action should be taken. Attention is positioned between the narrowing phase when a large amount of information reaches our mind, and the decision phase when we resolve whether or not and if so, how to act. Consciousness becomes attention when information crosses a critical point of importance in our minds and liberates potential to act (Figure No. 1).

In seeking a definition, two approaches may be found [Nęcka, 2000]. The first speaks of attention as a selector (filter) for information reaching the human cognitive system. The second places stress on the quantity of energy put into processes tied with the emergence of phenomena. Reconciling both approaches, it may be assumed that attention is a type of “reducing valve” for excessive information that requires a defined effort for use on many levels of information processing and action. This valve is vital and even without any theoretical knowledge about its existence it is utilized by everyone. Man’s

Figure No. 1. A picture of the attention process



Source: Davenport, Beck, 2001, p. 21.

cognitive potential is limited. Nevertheless, the external world sends infinite quantities of information without repast. Faced with such a situation, attention makes possible functioning, and even survival. However, its use necessitates the input of a defined personal effort, which is why it may be assumed that the joining of both approaches is justified. Selective attention is particularly important for action. This is linked with the ability to choose a single stimuli, piece of information, or source of stimulation at the cost of others. Our attention continuously selects various stimuli that, from our personal point of view, are important and of significance to us, separating them from the continuous bombardment coming from our surroundings and simultaneously rejecting competing stimuli. C. Cherry’s [1953] “cocktail party” is a very good illustration of this. We do not hear all statements at a large gathering. We only concentrate on the conversation we ourselves are conducting. However, when our name is mentioned in a distant corner of the room, we immediately pay attention. Selective attention is linked with the theory of D. E. Broadbent’s [1958] “attention filter.” An attention filter may be represented as the letter Y, whose upper arms reflect sensory stimuli channels, where information waits to be allowed access to semantic processing levels, which are represented by the stem of the letter.

Also worth mentioning is the theory of resources [Kahneman, 1973], which ties attention with mental energy. In this case, attention acts as a system for the distribution of energy (energy resources), supplying it to individual operations and deciding how well they will be performed. There is just one step separating the treatment of attention as a resource on an individual level and its adaptation for the resource theory (the resource-based view) [Penrose, 1959] and transfer to an organizational level. The concept of the attention-based organization and management is what is born in consequence. Accordingly, an important factor for success or failure is the ability to cope with the phenomenon of personal and organizational attention.

## The Essence and Meaning of Organizational Attention

As the history of organizational and management theory teaches, terms that are useful in identifying, explaining, and predicting the behavior of individuals may be translated for systems made up of individuals. The concept of attention has already appeared several times in the science of organizations. The beginnings of the exploration of this idea can be tied to M. D. Cohen's, J. G. March's, and J. P. Olsen's [1972] garbage can model. The garbage can is a representation of the interaction of four streams: problems, solutions, participants, and choices. In spite of the fact that they are not completely independent of each other, each of the streams may be considered independent and external with respect to the system. M. D. Cohen, J. G. March, and J. P. Olsen use the concept of energy that is associated with attention. Each of the participants of the can allocates energy to one of the choices during a time cycle. The energy is directed at the choice that is the closest to the decision, which is the one that had the smallest energy deficit at the end of the previous cycle.

The concepts of attention and organizational attention also appear in several other works, but their meaning differs somewhat from that described above. W. Bennis and B. Nanus [1985] use the term *attention management* to describe the freeing of an awareness for change and the going off in that direction by subordinates. Others speak of the limited attention of managers in the context of choosing between innovation and the improving of existing products, simultaneously presenting a mathematical model for optimizing the allocation of limited attention, characterizing its implications for various economic problems. W. Ocasio [1997] defines attention as "noticing, decoding, interpreting, and concentrating time and energy by decision makers in the organization on problems as well as their solutions."

Attention management requires the combining of personal attention (internal attention), which is distributed among various objects, and external attention, which is to be concentrated on us.

There are also several levels of attention management, both internal and external. The basic level is the personal one, which relates to a concrete person. Also important is the perceiving of attention distribution on the mass level. Moreover, the conviction that attention can be institutionalized in the organization is universal. The result of this is the consensus around that on which workers should concentrate their attention and how they should do so.

Next to a scale of attention concentration, it is possible to isolate six types, coupled into three contrasting pairs [Davenport, Beck, 2001]. Attention may be compulsory or voluntary, repulsing or attracting, and controlled or automatic.

The first two types of attention—compulsory and voluntary—relate to choice. Atten-

tion is subject to rules that state what is appropriate and what is not, what attention should be considered important and what should not. Attention is often justified by a striving towards some goal, but it may also have a different foundation, including curiosity or a desire to learn. People not only concentrate their attention on those objects that they have to concentrate on, but also on those that they want to concentrate on. We voluntarily pay attention to things that we consider interesting, things on which we would concentrate even if it was forbidden, where compulsory attention is something we are forced into. The second pair of attention types—repulsing and attracting—may be explained using the concepts of penalties and rewards. Repulsive attention is connected with a penalty. We are afraid that if we fail to do something, something bad will happen to us—we shall experience negative consequences. On the other hand, there is also attracting attention, which is linked with reward. We do something because we hope to achieve benefits—the positive results of our actions.

W. Ocasio [1997], citing R. M. Shiffrin and M. W. Schneider [1997], identify two different models of attention—controlled and automatic. The first requires significant attention capacity, is for the most part subject to individual control, and is strongly dependent on activity burdens. The second occurs beyond the active control of the individual, is difficult to assess, and is the result of learning and experience. Each newly learned activity remains under the complete control of the consciousness. As skills are acquired, they become increasingly unconscious. Upon becoming adept, they are performed automatically in line with an established scheme without the participation of the consciousness. Automatic activities are carried out quickly and in parallel, while controlled actions are conducted serially. This means they are slow and require greater effort, which in its turn quickly results in fatigue when executed. Other differences include the fact that controlled activities are controlled “globally,” which means they involve the entire cognitive system, especially attention and working memory. Automatic activities, for their part, are controlled by “local” structures and use almost no attention on the part of memory, if at all. The automation of activities allows for the freeing up of conscious attention, which may then be turned to matters of a higher plane, which cannot be automated. The borderline between these two types of activities is not sharp because the passage from controlled activities to automated ones is fluid.

A key to analyzing processes relating to organizational attention is an examination of placement. Attention is concentrated on many objects, which creates a distribution of attention. Both quantity and type of attention devoted to each object is of importance in this case.

## The Measurement and Management of Organizational Attention

T. H. Davenport and J. C. Beck [2001] created a tool to measure attention that they called an *attention scope*. It allows them to assess how people and organizations allocate their attention. It aids in diagnosing problems of attention distribution, investigate how an organization directs the attention of participants, and analyze attention on the part of customers. The essence of the attention scope is its measurements by types as described above. This tool also explains how to understand and interpret received results. The first phase in applying the attention scope is the creation of a list of objects on which we concentrate our attention. The selection of objects is dependant on the goal of the specific study. Study participants define their relationship to six statements for each attention object. The statements are presented in Table No. 1.

**Table No. 1.** Attention scope questions

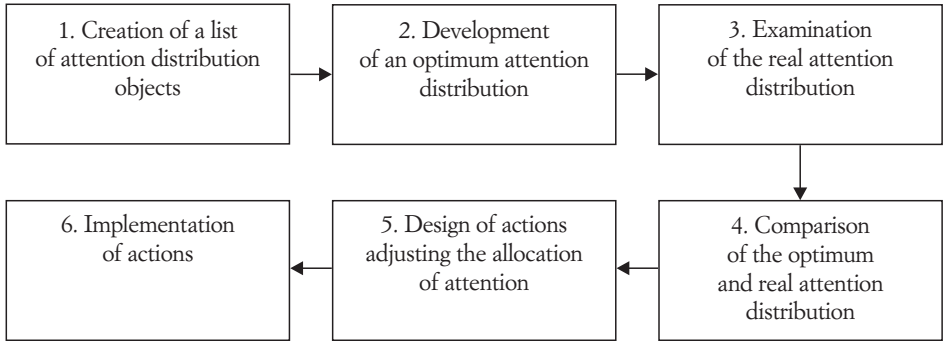
<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Question</b>
Compulsory – Voluntary	I could not avoid it; it was necessary, inevitable. I wanted to concentrate on that; it was voluntary.
Repulsing – Attracting	It excites me; it is a source of real pleasure. I could have been exposed to unpleasantness if I had not concentrated on that; it was not necessarily pleasant
Controlled – Automatic	I concentrated on that very intensely; I devoted much time to that. I had it on my mind, but unconsciously; actually, I did not have to concentrate on that.

Source: Own studies on the basis of Davenport, Beck, 2001.

The results of the test are subsequently carried over to the attention scope diagram, which depicts both the quantity and type of attention devoted to specific objects. The diagram is then compared with the desired distribution of attention in terms of achievement of organizational objectives. Concrete actions aimed at achieving the desired state may be formulated on the basis of interpretation of results.

Concrete actions leading to an achieving of the desired distribution of organizational attention obviously depends on the strategy assumed by the organization and objectives that it strives to realize. For example, there is evidence that an organization becomes more entrepreneurial by concentrating attention on innovation, proaction, risk taking, long-term operating perspectives, and the creation of organizational values. It presents a higher level of product innovation and proactively seeks out and uses entrepreneurial opportunities. They act to overtake the competition and are targeted at taking calculated

Figure No. 2. The process of examining and adjusting attention distribution in using the attention scope



Source: Own studies on the basis of Davenport, Beck, 2001.

risks [Bratnicki, Zbierowski, 2003]. In order to achieve better attention management effects, it should be coupled with other areas of the organization’s activities. It seems that communications between organizational attention management and human resource management is particularly important.

### Attention Perspectives in the Recruitment Process

There is no doubt that the utilization of the concept of organizational attention management in recruitment can bring tangible effects in proper managerial staff selection. Several recommendation may be forwarded in this area that encompass both organizational attention management itself and its association with the recruitment process.

- The awareness and competencies of managers should be raised in the area of organizational attention management. This particularly applies to managers responsible for human resource management, which is a sphere that is important from the point of view of distribution of attention in the organization. Many corporations, mainly American ones, have a post for attention management, where if there is no such position then the function is realized by the human resource department because of the ease of its introduction there as well as close ties with other human resource management functions such as staff training.
- It is necessary to document the practical application of organizational attention management. This primarily applies to defining the distribution of organizational attention and subsequently identifying the “attention profile” of the manager who will be used in the recruitment process. The organization should be prepared for utilizing ready profiles in the recruitment process. It should also approach organizational attention management

in a continuous manner. Once developed, attention profiles may become outdated in a short space of time in turbulent surroundings, which means their application becomes ineffective.

■ When the conditions of the first two points are met, measurements of candidate attention distribution should be introduced into recruitment processes. Obviously, this measurement cannot serve as a replacement for traditional criteria used in recruiting managerial staff. However, it should supplement analysis of the candidate's personality traits and professional experience. As in the case of traditional psychological tests or analysis of skills and experience, the attention profiles, although similar for the whole organization, should differ in terms of requirements for concrete managerial posts.

■ It is necessary to develop improved methods for measuring attention distribution on an organizational level as well as in the case of candidates for the managerial staff in the recruitment process. Attention distribution measurements is a troublesome matter. To date, psychology has failed to supply tools that do this in a manner that leaves no doubts. It should be remembered that attention distribution is governed by different principles in each organization. Nevertheless, research efforts should aim at developing universal measurement tools.

## Final Recommendations

There is no doubt that organizational attention management is an inspiring management concept. It is equally difficult to imagine the introduction of this concept without linking it to human resource management, including the recruitment of the managerial staff. However, there seem to be no examples of practical application. Strong theoretical foundations seem to have been already developed for the creation of accurate reviews and tests assessing the attention characteristics of a person. It also seems that the conducting of the relevant studies is not difficult and their combining with other selection tools cannot be detrimental. This road will make it possible to develop tests and model profiles for desirable candidates unique to every company. Uniqueness and security against imitation are prerequisite to gaining a competitive advantage.

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