



Constructing Perceptions: How Talent Managers View University Graduates in the Recruitment Process

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Abstract

The current workforce faces the biggest generational diversity ever. The newest generation – Generation Z is gaining strength and occupies a significant proportion of the labor pool. It is inevitable to provide space for studying factors influencing this cohort in academia otherwise students will lack current knowledge from their study fields.

This study focused on university graduates belonging by age among the generational cohort of Generation Z, and their interaction with talent managers during recruitment. Specifically, I intended to answer, “How is a perception of university graduates constructed by talent managers in the recruitment phase?”.

Data was collected through interviews and a focus group to answer the question. The Person-Organization Fit Theory (P-O Fit) was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study. Two supporting theories – Social Cognitive Theory and Signaling Theory were included to provide robustness and depth of the findings. Based on the theoretical framework and the literature review, three guiding propositions were formulated.

The key findings are summarized under the guiding propositions and discussed throughout the theoretical framework. The findings denote that the perceptions are constructed by observing, interpreting signals, and adopting characteristics of Gen Z from literature. Significant differences exist between constructing perceptions of university graduates as objective, subjective, or perceived fit. For further research, it is recommended to investigate how perceptions are constructed from the viewpoint of university graduates and collect data suitable for studying the fit from the other perspective.

Keywords: talent managers, recruitment, university graduates, perception, P-O Fit Theory

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1 Introduction

We are currently experiencing an era with the greatest generational variety ever seen. The concept of a multigenerational workforce has become a fundamental aspect of the workplace (Saracho, 2023). Millennials are still the largest generation in the workplace (Pichler et al., 2021), however, the job market has registered changes due to a fresh supply in the form of Generation Z (Zhong et al., 2023). Gen Zers enrich the current labor market and bring impacts to the workplace where they meet other age groups, too. In 2024, those are individuals around their mid-40s and mid-50s known as Gen X, and Baby Boomers who are in their late 50s and mid-70s. In some companies, there might be a few members of the Silent generation, too, who are in their late 70s and early 90s. That brings a solid base for age diversity but at the same, it can be challenging to connect through all these generations (Smith & Garriety, 2020). Age belongs to the most varied groups of diversity in organizations. There are multiple reasons, such as higher retirement age, a decrease in mandatory schooling years in some countries, and hiring both older and young employees as a reaction to worker shortage. While age diversity can be fruitful in passing experience, knowledge, and skills, it can also cause harm when communication and coordination fail. That is a source of stereotypes such as young workers are lazy and old employees do not want to learn new things (Burke et al., 2015).

1.1 Importance in organizations and businesses

Understanding Gen Z is crucial for businesses and organizations, as this demographic is poised to shape the future workforce, comprising nearly 30% of it by 2025 (Saracho, 2023).

Benítez-Márquez et al. (2022) highlight in their research that Generation Z brings real challenges to workplaces and management. It is necessary not to deny that changes are happening and organizations should act accordingly. Different adjustments to the company environment come with every new age cohort. Therefore the role of human resource management is irreplaceable in a smooth onboarding and adaptation to the new work. A global pandemic has shaped the adolescence of this age group and has shaped education and careers. The package of this new generation, newly created job forms (gig economy), and the post-pandemic scenery of work represent priorities of research not only for HR but for all departments in organizations as Gen Zers will develop their careers through these circumstances (McKee-Ryan, 2021). Vieira et al. (2024) call attention mainly to HR when it comes to Gen Z as talent management, attraction, and retention theories respectively, were

developed to fit previous generations entering the workforce before the 21st century. The world is significantly more globalized, and lifelong employment within one company is no longer favorable. Undoubtedly, HR faces a shift in this paradigm.

Another reason why it is beneficial to study the new generation is that its presence will affect the social and professional contexts in which all employees function (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022).

1.2 Importance in academia

In academia, there is a gap as the topic of Generation Z has not been researched adequately (McKee-Ryan, 2021).

Hernandez-De-Menendez et al. (2020) believe that schools and universities need to reconsider their learning-teaching strategies and implement approaches that will be more interactive and visual, strongly supported by technology, networking, and social media. Research shows that there are preferences among university students to rely on electronic study materials. The students reckon that technology has a positive impact on the quality of teaching and their learning experience. The strong inclination to technology is one of the reasons why it is imperative to dedicate space for research on university students. Generation Z comes with different student profiles than before and brings an urge for change. Miller and Mills (2019) found out that students expect that universities will pay attention to mental health and academia will provide a supportive environment that will cater to the distinctive characteristics of students.

Studying influential factors and a broader picture of this generation will also be abundant for university students themselves. If the impact of this generation is underestimated, students will be provided with insufficient knowledge in their study fields (McKee-Ryan, 2021). Especially programs such as education, leadership, human resources, and organizational studies cannot ignore the presence of this age cohort and the changes it introduces to these disciplines (Mohr & Mohr, 2017).

While Pinho and Gomes (2023) do not deny the impact of Gen Z on many industries, they are critical to some narratives about this generation. In their research, they found that often prescribed values to Gen Zers such as sustainability work rather as a fashionable concept than actual mindset proven by visible behavioral patterns. Other articles examine generational differences from the age-related factors point of view ("Generation Z in the workplace,"

2021), and critically explore identity aspects behind fashion and favoring social media (Delgado et al., 2023).

1.3 Research question and its background

Several articles (Hernandez-De-Menendez et al., 2020; Miller & Mills, 2019; McKee-Ryan, 2021) highlight the power of Gen Z and based on both quantitative and qualitative research found features characteristic of this generation. At the same time, there are also sources (Pinho & Gomes, 2023; Delgado et al., 2023) ascribing those features to results of current trends. In any case, the presence of this new generation cannot be overlooked as its functioning in the workforce, such as HR, will be impactful (Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Vieira et al., 2024). There are various resources describing how HR perceives Generation Z and its expectations in a work environment (Pichler et al., 2021; Racolța-Paina & Irini, 2021; Rue, 2018). There is, however, no literature focusing on how these perceptions are made. It is unknown whether the perceptions mirror narratives about Gen Z, are based on personal experiences, or have a completely different foundation.

The central aim of my research is to understand where the perception that HR managers have about Gen Z comes from. More specifically, the research will focus on talent managers as they have the first contact with a potential employee and are part of the decision-making whether the candidate will become a part of the company (Cattermole, 2019). Additionally, the research will target university graduates who are in year 2024 no older than 29 years as that is the limit for an individual to be considered a member of Generation Z (Pichler et al., 2021). Lastly, the focus is on university graduates in white-collar jobs. The reasons are supported by research by Deloitte (n.d.) that shares that characteristics of work sought by Gen Z are career growth, work-life balance, and alignment with personal values which are more commonly addressed in white-collar jobs. This research also looks at the evolution of work and what changes and requirements it might bring. Based on the growing tendency of technology and more frequent preferences for various skills, many occupations already now highly value a combination of knowledge in business, management, design, digital tools, analytical thinking and others. That leads back to the choice of the target group as the combination of knowledge is more accessible to university graduates (Deloitte, n.d.).

Other statistics show that a higher percentage of Gen Z has pursued higher education compared to previous generations. That makes them particularly relevant for white-collar

fields that often require advanced degrees and specialized skills (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023).

This research covers a community of university graduates whose age corresponds to the characteristic of the generational cohort dated from 1995 and 2012 – Generation Z. Since the focus is on people belonging to a certain age-limited group influenced by various ongoing factors, the research is tied to the present, year 2024.

The central aim of my research is to understand where the perception that talent managers have about university graduates comes from.

Therefore, my research question is:

“How is a perception of university graduates constructed by talent managers in the recruitment phase?”

The objectives are to conduct interviews and a focus group discussion to acquire qualitative insights into talent managers' perspectives on university graduates and constructions of those perspectives.

1.4 Structure of the research

The following research is structured into five chapters.

The first chapter provides a literature review to build a foundation on topics crucial for analyzing findings and answering the research question.

After a short introduction, the chapter focuses on three topics: HR, Gen Z, and Social Changes. To better understand the connection between these topics, a bridging paragraph briefly introducing the next chapter is included.

The second chapter explains the theoretical framework. The main theory will be introduced together with two other supporting theories. At the end of this section, three guiding propositions will be addressed.

The third chapter presents the methodology. The introduction offers a glimpse of the rationale behind the chosen methods, which are further discussed in the chapter. Additionally, this chapter addresses the study's limitations.

The fourth chapter analyzes the research findings. This chapter is organized into three themes according to the guiding propositions. Each of these sections reveals categories corresponding to the characteristics of the propositions.

The fifth chapter discusses and interprets the significance of the findings from the previous chapter to illustrate the link between the results, the literature review, the theoretical framework and, no less importantly, to answer the research question. This chapter is structured into five parts. After a short introduction, the findings are discussed through the main theory, P-O Fit, but also through the supporting theories, SCT and Signaling Theory. This chapter is concluded by reflecting on how the theories complement each other.

Lastly, the conclusion underscores the new insights and perspectives the research has introduced to the field and elaborates on their importance and implications.

2 Literature Review

In the literature review, the focus will be on showcasing the connection between the present literature and the research question, which is: “How is a perception of university graduates constructed by talent managers in the recruitment phase?” As this part will reveal, many recent studies have focused on the characteristics of people currently finishing their studies and entering the workforce, defining them as Generation Z. While these individuals might only share the common traits of age and the transition to adult life, researchers often overlook dissimilarities and generalize a vast group of people into generational categories. Millions of diverse individuals are grouped under the term “Gen Z” and are given a set of descriptions and comparisons with other generations. Although the concept of generations is not problematic in itself, ignoring the individualistic aspect can lead to generational stereotypes (Van Rossem, 2018). The perception of university graduates will be studied from the HR point of view; therefore, the literature review first focuses on the role and function of this type of management. The review continues by introducing the term Generation Z, emphasizing the broad context of influences behind a generational cohort, making it a complex concept. Finally, a theory relevant to the recruitment and selection process is introduced.

2.1 Human Resources

The role of human resource management (HRM) primarily focuses on staffing, such as recruitment, the selection process, and placement. It also encompasses training, development,

performance management, benefits, compensation, compliance, and industrial relations (Dowling, 2017). HRM is a discipline that combines work management and employment relationships. It is important not to mistake it for personnel management, which mainly focuses on the working relationship and agreements. The main difference is that HRM takes a more strategic role. It connects job design and the effectiveness of work management, which leads to fulfilling strategic goals. These goals are part of the organizational strategy; thus, it is essential to integrate HRM into organizational management (Bratton et al., 2022).

2.1.1 Presence of HRM

There are many issues within today's practice of HRM. Firstly, traditional models are not compatible with current employment practices. For several years, many workers have been working remotely, dealing with mental health issues such as depression or isolation, or trying to balance their occupations with family life. Several insecurities have arisen, such as insufficient wages, unemployment, or reduced working hours. There has been significant income inequality where "super managers" receive seven-figure bonuses while treating other employees as assets. HRM has been transformed by the spread of artificial intelligence technology, environmental changes, and COVID-19, which will likely contribute to changes in employment and work relationships. HR who is aware of these challenges responds accordingly to manage the company's talents effectively (Bratton et al., 2021).

2.1.2 Potential and Talent

It is not uncommon to hear that someone has potential. However, it is not always clear what it means, and how to identify it. Organizational psychologists Silzer and Church (2009) define potential as the possibility of enhancing current skills to achieve a desired result. To do so, individuals are expected to demonstrate their talent. Talent consists of natural abilities and acquired skills and knowledge. Therefore, talented people are not only gifted with abilities, but they also know how to use their expertise and comprehension. Talent can be considered an asset, such as a competitive advantage that can develop over time based on current trends and demand.

In organizational settings, Silzer and Church (2009) claim, that there is an ongoing search for talents with the greatest potential to boost organizational success in the future, but the focus on individual growth is very low. Some companies use various categories of potential, usually labeled as talent pools. To identify individuals and their potential, companies must ask the

question: "Potential for what?" This is the first crucial step in recognizing talents with potential.

Silzer and Church (2009) explore whether it is possible to measure the potential for future opportunities or whether the focus should be on the individual's current abilities. Since they define potential as "a possibility," the issue is how can one sense or measure it when it is not yet actual.

Nevertheless, there is an effort to establish criteria and specifics for different parts of the organization and business. This could include performance in senior and leadership roles, strategic and development roles, or managing a marketing and international sales department. The authors, Silzer and Church (2009), mention that aspiration to define and measure potential might be risky and lead to a misuse of this term. As "potential" is loosely defined, each organization has its own expectations of what potential is, and these definitions can vary significantly. Many organizations understand the potential as the ability to move vertically to a certain position within the firm, for example. Others define potential based on an individual's past performance, which is very inaccurate as it reveals nothing about the individual's future behavior in a different setting.

Silzer and Church (2009) conclude that there is no unitary opinion on whether to have universal characteristics for potential. Some authors support adjusting the definition to the nature of the company and having several definitions. Others prefer to use potential as a synonym for ambition and drive to succeed.

Undoubtedly, both current and past performance are crucial indicators to consider when making talent-related decisions. However, Silzer and Church (2009) highlight that there should not be confusion between evaluating potential and performance. For some companies, it is more convenient to promote employees based on their performance results as it simplifies justification in the short term. The problem arises when the performance is not sufficient, and the employee turns out to lack talent and does not have the potential to fulfill the role or be further promoted. Therefore, it is efficient for organizations to have a unit that would specifically manage talents.

2.1.3 Talent Management

Lewis and Heckman (2006) doubt there is a clear definition of talent management (TM). Nevertheless, they add that the most accurate adjective describing this term is "strategic". This type of management strengthens human resources practices and brings value to a strategic decision framework. Collings and Mellahi (2009) highlight the function of TM as a

paradigm shift from traditional human resources practices such as filling vacancies towards managing talents suitable for the dynamic competitive environment of today's pace. Talent management works on the strategic goals of HR, mainly within the employee life cycle.

2.1.4 Employee Life Cycle

The employee life cycle starts with the attraction phase, where the company tries to attract new talent (Cattermole, 2019). This stage is the most important because if the company cannot create a sense of urgency to apply, the chance to interact with potential employees is lost. In many cases, applicants pay close attention to attraction practices as they affect the overall perception of the organization and influence applicants' intentions to apply. Since only a limited amount of information is available during the attraction phase, even a small detail such as a lengthy application process can deter candidates from proceeding to the second phase (Roberson et al., 2005).

The second phase is recruitment, where the organization focuses on the application process to choose the right candidates (Cattermole, 2019). The most common type of recruitment nowadays is e-recruitment, as the existence of the Internet has heavily influenced this process in recent years. Online recruitment has many benefits: it is less time-consuming (Kapse et al., 2012), is more cost-effective, and provides easier access to job seekers from abroad, as the online space has no borders. Filtration tools are available that speed up the process and enable the scanning of more applicants (Rosoiu & Popescu, 2016).

Once the candidates are chosen, the life cycle moves to the third stage: onboarding. In this phase, the new hire is introduced to the working environment and the role itself. It is also a phase in which the organization finds out whether the new employee meets its expectations (Cattermole, 2019). Byford et al. (2017) believe that this stage is more than just getting someone "onboard." Integrating the new employee is key in this stage, as the goal is to help the employee adapt as effortlessly as possible.

Next, the employee enters the retention phase, usually the longest part of the cycle, which aims to prevent the worker from leaving. There are many reasons why organizations want to retain their employees: finding a replacement is costly, retaining employees helps with organizational growth, and when an employee leaves, they take part of the culture, skills, and knowledge with them, which can be used by competitors. To ensure that the retention stage is successful, the organization should have an inclusive culture that employees feel a part of, allowing them to progress to the development phase (Singh, 2019).

In the development phase, the company should assist the employee by showing them their potential career path and supporting their growth and development (Cattermole, 2019). This can be achieved through training, which is intended to enhance employees' performance and positively impact the company's competitive advantage (Singh, 2012; Koval, 2015).

When the life cycle reaches the separation phase, the company should keep the door open for its best talents, as they might return with fresh ideas. It is also advisable to collaborate with those leaving to ensure a positive image of the organization is maintained (Cattermole, 2019).

In summary, human resource management focuses on staffing and managing industrial and employee relations.

Still more often various factors can impact HR such as different work habits due to COVID-19 or the spread of artificial intelligence technology. HR which keeps up with these changes can avoid losing current or potential talented employees.

Potential and talent are two closely related terms, and employers expect them to be characteristics of their employees. The reason for the high demand for talent is that it can be considered an asset, such as a competitive advantage. To leverage someone's talent, the potential must be present. However, since one definition of potential is "a possibility," simple measurement does not exist. On the other hand, when there is a lack of potential, the relationship between an employer and an employee can be threatened.

To minimize friction between organizational strategic goals and managing talents, a department of HR, talent management, is valuable. This discipline operates within the employee life cycle to ensure that the right people are chosen and are in the right roles.

The first phase of the cycle is the attraction phase. Candidates who are attracted move on to the second step, which is recruitment. If they succeed, they continue to the third phase: onboarding. This phase involves integration and helping new employees smoothly adapt to the work environment. Once employees are fully adapted, the company aims to retain them for as long as possible, leading to the next phase of their life cycle: retention. Employees usually spend most of their time in this phase, and to ensure it is productive, companies provide another step: the development phase. The final part of the life cycle is separation, in which the employee leaves the company.

2.2 Generation Z

Individuals born between 1995 and 2012 are labeled as Generation Z. Most researchers claim that Generation Z has many unique features that shape the group and differentiate it from all previous generations (Pichler et al., 2021; Racołța-Paina & Irini, 2021; Rue, 2018). The reason to invest in understanding Gen Zers is their growing presence. Currently, there are more than two billion of these individuals, and they occupy over twenty percent of the job market. That is the second biggest segment, right after millennials (Pichler et al., 2021). Many authors summarize these individuals as digital nomads, flexible and independent, open to diversity, and part of a global generation (Pichler et al., 2021; Racołța-Paina & Irini, 2021). A significant part of their lives is lived online, through social media (Rue, 2018).

2.2.1 Digital Nomads

Digital nomads is a term for people who combine work, travel, and their leisure time. Reichenberg (2018) talks about digital nomads as young professionals who, in most cases, work with information and communication technologies, which allows them to work completely independently when it comes to location. That is a great benefit for this generation as periodic extensive travels are highly admirable in their lifestyle. Mancinelli (2020) adds that this unique way of living is sought by someone who aspires to live a meaningful life. For some, that means not being attached to a certain workplace or place of living. Not only can digital nomads explore a variety of places in the whole world, but they can also discover their true selves truly and deeply. The author admits that there are plenty of occupations that involve traveling the world, such as non-governmental organization workers and tourist guides, but that does not mean that everyone can be characterized as a digital nomad then. Because there is a difference between traveling as a part of a job position and traveling as an independent decision. The determining factor is the nomad's free choice.

2.2.2 Diversity

Together with the characteristics of Gen Z, diversity is a key factor that forms this group. Diversity is an umbrella expression for differences in gender, sex, age, social status, race, nationality, language, ethnicity, or ability. That serves a uniqueness to every individual, but at the same time, it can become a tool for discrimination and exclusion. It divides society between "us" and "them" (Peterlini, 2023). When it comes to race and ethnicity, this generation is the most diverse of all the previous generations as nearly every second Gen Zer is non-white. Since they encounter greater diversity on an everyday basis, members of this

generation do not tolerate inequality. Moreover, diversity in organizations is an attractive factor when choosing a workplace (Pichler et al., 2021). On the other hand, according to Sladek and Grabinger (2014), diversity has a negative consequence on Gen Zers' identities. Many borders between the categories were diminished, and definitions of groups have become broad. That fact also influences unfavorably this generation on a professional level. The individuals do not have a deep understanding of themselves to define their qualities and preferences and are not aware of their weaknesses. Additionally, the difficulties with identities have caused Gen Z's interest in fame culture. Many people nowadays are famous just because of their appearance on social media, such as influencers, vloggers, TikTokers, and others. Gen Zers do not watch these people for their talent, but firstly, because they are interested in their personal lives. Secondly, famous people tend to express their defined identities, and Gen Z aims to acquire knowledge of how to find their own.

2.2.3 Soft Skills

Besides positive features, Racolța-Paina and Irini (2021) believe that this generation is hard to motivate and does not flourish in soft skills. Soft skills, in other words, prerequisites for success, include motivational and personality traits, goals, problem-solving capacity, and individual preferences (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). More specifically, skills such as communication, teamwork, reasoning both verbal and numerical, cultural awareness, a sense of responsibility, good manners, empathy, sociability, and others. According to Schulz (2008), soft skills are strongly demanded in a work environment, but they must be combined with hard (technical) skills to present a competitive advantage. The most important soft skill is communication. He explains that it is a very complex skill, and many other soft skills are formed out of it. It starts with language proficiency, behavior, conversation, rhetoric, and etiquette and includes nonverbal communication such as body language as well. All of this is necessary for everyone's career life, and mastering communication is an indicator of competency in social settings.

2.2.4 Social Media

There is a particular type of communication that Gen Zers are considered to be proficient at. That is in communicating by sending emojis, Graphics Interchange Format (GIFs), memes¹, and word shortcuts that deliver the message with a minimum (verbal) effort from the sender. Social media is a part of the growing up of this generation. That results in spending more time

¹ Concepts of cultural information that spread virally through social media and usually contain an entertaining message.

at home on smartphones, which is usually prioritized over spending time out with friends. Social media is a place where Gen Zers look for recognition, validation, and acceptance. Since everyone wants to show their best selves on social media, it is almost impossible to keep pace with these incredibly high standards as it gives the impression that everyone lives a better life than us. The constant comparison with others can be mentally very difficult, and many Gen Zers admit that they have signs of depression and feel lonely. Social media influences how these individuals feel, and they also believe that social media affects how other people perceive them (Rue, 2018).

2.2.5 Events Shaping Gen Z

According to Racolța-Paina and Irimi (2021), except for diversity and social media, there are no more influential factors shaping Generation Z as they have grown up in a culture of security. Nevertheless, based on global issues and political events, security is definitely not a word that has been a part of the background of forming this generation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the oldest Gen Zers started their professional careers and faced enormous challenges as many work positions had to adapt to restrictions or were shut down for many months. The younger Gen Zers, on the other hand, witnessed their parents losing their jobs during the pandemic and were left with an insecure future (Benítez-Márquez et al. 2022). This generation has been shaped by catastrophic events such as terrorism and an increase in school shootings. They were influenced by the Great Recession in 2007. Generation Z lives in a climate crisis (Sladek, & Grabinger, 2014) and dangerous politics when a part of the world is at war, such as Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine (Pereira et al., 2022; Cohn-Sherbok & El-Alami, 2022).

In brief, this generation is characterized in literature by its significant digital presence, diverse backgrounds, and global perspectives. They are known for embracing digital nomadism, valuing diversity, and navigating challenges such as identity formation amidst fame culture, and societal inequalities. Despite strengths in technical skills, Generation Z faces challenges in developing soft skills like communication and empathy. Social media plays a crucial role in their lives, impacting self-perception and societal interactions. Furthermore, Generation Z has been shaped by global events like the COVID-19 pandemic, economic crises, terrorism, and environmental issues, influencing their outlook and experiences.

2.3 Social Changes

Before defining what are social changes, one should clarify what a change is itself. One of the meanings could be a transition from a place A to a place B along with an interference of time. A change could also be understood as a replacement of one thing by something else. It could be a continuous flow, a sequence of events, emergence of new features (Patterson, 2018).

Based on the theories of social changes, modern literature summarizes these changes as results of political, cultural, and economic elements (Giddens, 1991). Namely the European Union, the Great Recession, COVID-19, and technology (Moreira & Hick, 2021; Floridi, 2020) for instance.

2.3.1 Technology

For the past few years, one of the most distinctive social changes not only in the cultural aspect, has been technology. This change targets all spheres of our lives and is still ongoing and spreading at a rapid pace (Ask & Søråa, 2024). It is our tool how to stay connected with the world. And the word "world" does not have to mean the whole planet. It is our family, friends, or a colleague sitting on the other side of the office. Technology is a mediator of our communication. From e-mails, simple calls, SMS, and Facetime, taking snapshots, and voice messages, and to giving likes and sending memes. And the list can go on. It is a source of entertainment, education, discoveries, and opportunities, just to name some other features.

According to Ask and Søråa (2024), technology and the world of digitalization is like a forest. You might feel relatively safe, but your awareness should also be on an alert as you never know what could pop up from behind a tree. Even if you think you are familiar with this forest, there are still some spots that can be explored and discovered as it is difficult to precisely point at the forest's borderlines. The influence of technology on society is undoubtable. In this type of social change, technology forms our behavior, values, norms, and relationships. Kinsley (2022), nevertheless, portrays the role of technology in social changes differently. Technology spreads as a consequence of social changes and at the same time, social changes spread as a consequence of technology. He believes that technology is the core of social change mainly because it both influences and is influenced by society.

2.3.2 Generations

After describing members of Gen Z and changes influencing this group, to the complex understanding it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the word "generation".

Commonly generations represent families, birth cohorts, and the third category which stands

for social movements and organizations. Even though people are grouped into multiple clusters, it is crucial to take the extra step and study individuals concurrently in all generational categories present in their lives. There should be a special focus on influential factors. The fact that an individual is a member of a generation in a family and at the same time a member of a group of people born in the same year, does not provide any useful knowledge (Alwin & McCammon, 2007).

2.3.3 Mannheim

Mannheim brings the connection between social changes and generations. The concept of generations is significant in society and its usage is enhanced by understanding the social changes of periods (Mannheim, 1952). He explains the appearance of social changes as a result of various factors. Primarily, because of the continuous exposure of new participants and continual termination of previous members from the cultural process, the temporary presence of individuals in a historical process, and prerequisites for passing on the cultural heritage. He elaborates on this statement as changes influencing individuals and therefore impacting social changes are usually caused by two phenomena. Primarily social changes are affected by aging. Throughout life, people change due to biological and psychological influences as well as respond to social mechanisms. Aging is recognized as gaining maturity, getting older, or downgrading cognitive functions. There is a continuous substitution of generational cohorts that replace the older ones with younger individuals (Alwin & McCammon, 2007).

The second change that approaches societies through individuals is regarding unique reactions to historical events and processes. They are commonly known as period effects that take place in historical time. Alwin and McCammon (2007) describe period effects are extensive changes that happen as an outcome of historical moments involving the whole society. These events are wars, political and economic changes, social movements, or global pandemics, for instance.

To understand generations and their roles in social changes, it is crucial to be aware of the flexibility and individual functions in the age cohort. Generations do not operate the same way all the time for all their members. Experiences of this variable diverge based on social

positions and correlative experiences of outcomes entrenched in this context. There is an absence of borderlines and dissimilarities of generations are relevant mostly as subpopulations. On the other hand, the concept of a generation has the potential to map the mutual design of values, beliefs, behavioral patterns, and viewpoints (Alwin & McCammon, 2007).

Understanding these generational nuances is essential not only for grasping broader social dynamics but also for effectively managing human resources within organizations. Given the distinct values and behavioral patterns of Generation Z, it becomes imperative to explore how these traits might align with organizational cultures and environments.

2.4 Person-Organization Fit Theory

This alignment is where the Person-Organization (P-O) fit theory becomes particularly relevant. This theory provides a framework for understanding how talent managers construct their perceptions through the lens of compatibility. P-O fit aims at connections between a potential employee's values, characteristics, beliefs, needs, and organizational culture (Verquer et al., 2003). By using this theory in this paper, the goal is to research how talent managers construct their perceptions of university graduates by assessing their fit for an organization.

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Person-Organization Fit Theory

As already mentioned, the Person-Organization (P-O) Fit Theory is highly suitable for this research work and the research question, therefore it will be used as the primary theory.

The theory works with the possibility of organizational characteristics corresponding characteristics of an individual. The individual's characteristics are assessed based on the amount of compatibility between the two parties (Hoffman & Woehr, 2006). The compatibility is usually measured through three approaches. Subjective, objective, and perceived fit (Kristof, 1996).

Subjective fit focuses on qualities that cannot be measured directly. Rather it involves explicitly asking a potential employee how well their profile fits the organizational characteristics (Hoffman & Woehr, 2006) and a feeling of a match from the side of a recruiter (Piasentin & Chapman, 2006).

Objective fit contrasts the subjective. Objective fit builds upon measurable qualities such as skills, qualifications, education, and knowledge. This fit objectively reflects the alignment between an applicant's characteristics and job requirements (Edwards, 1991).

Perceived fit encompasses a broader perception of other factors involved in and influencing the recruitment process such as external recommendations and evaluations and body language and behavior of the applicant (Cable & DeRue, 2002).

3.2 Social Cognitive Theory

To enhance the depth and robustness of the research, two supporting theories will be applied.

Firstly, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) highlights the layer of “how” the perceptions are constructed. SCT describes learning and forming perceptions through observations, reciprocal determinism, and self-efficacy. Reciprocal determinism is, in other words, the concept of behavior, cognitive factors (such as beliefs, and personality characteristics) and the environment simultaneously influenced by each other. Self-efficacy is a term for a belief in our capacity to reach a specific goal (Hoose, 2020).

In the context of P-O fit, SCT represents a valuable tool for understanding how recruiters construct their perceptions of potential employees by observing and interacting with the candidates in the organizational environment (Wood & Bandura, 1989).

3.3 Signaling Theory

The second supporting theory is the Signaling Theory. This theory will help clarify communication and perception of various signals between applicants and recruiters. Signaling Theory applies to interactions between two parties where there is a need for information from one party which is transmitted by signals as other disclosure of the information would not be possible (Ashuri & Bar-Ilan, 2016). In HR, Signaling Theory posits that frequent decision-making is required based on behavior, signals, and cues available at the moment during recruiting (Chowdhury, 2022). This provides a dynamic interaction between a job applicant and a recruiter and reveals how communication can impact a perceived fit and hiring decisions.

3.4 Guiding Propositions

Applying the P-O Fit Theory supported by SCT and Signaling Theory provides a solid framework for understanding how talent managers construct their perceptions of university graduates. This combination of the mentioned theories allows us to explore intrinsic

prerequisites of fit while it also considers communication procedures that are extrinsic and underpin recruitment decisions.

P-O Fit Theory is used to identify whether an individual and an organization are suitable for each other based on mutual characteristics and needs.

SCT works well for understanding how talent managers create their perceptions of candidates based on observations influencing the evaluation process in recruitment.

Signaling Theory exposes signals in communication styles and mechanisms revealing how university graduates indicate their fit through CVs, interviews, behavior, and other interactions and how these signals are interpreted by talent managers.

This theoretical framework together with the comprehensive literature review on topics such as characteristics of Gen Z presents a cogent foundation for formulating guiding propositions. Guiding propositions serve a role of exploratory nature where phenomena and meanings can be explored and understood contextually rather than tested by hypotheses. Since guiding propositions are flexible and adaptable, the focus can be adjusted and there is no expectation to measure or predict possible results. The outcomes of guiding propositions are open-ended and do not intend to test specific relations (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Yin, 2017).

For this paper, the guiding propositions are as follows:

Proposition One

Recruiters' perceptions of university graduates are significantly influenced by observational learning processes, where past interactions and experiences with candidates inform their current judgments.

Proposition Two

The effectiveness of signals sent by university graduates, such as resumes, cover letters, and interview behavior, plays a critical role in shaping recruiters' perceptions of their fit within the organization.

Proposition Three

The unique characteristics and values of Generation Z, as highlighted in the literature review, significantly influence recruiters' perceptions and expectations, affecting their assessments of fit within contemporary organizational environments.

The rationale behind the formulations of these propositions is to incorporate the P-O Fit supported by Social Cognitive Theory and Signaling Theory as well as by the literature review.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

According to Lacey and Luff, (2001) for someone who aims to answer the question of "what", "how" or "why", a qualitative approach to inquiry could be the right choice. Nevertheless, that does not mean that these questions cannot be answered by quantitative research. The results, however, will vary.

The qualitative method puts the researcher into the shoes of the researched participants and allows researchers to dive deep into the problematization. Gibson and Brown (2009) note that working with qualitative data collection is not as simple as it might seem. Qualitative data, compared to quantitative, can camouflage its clarity and it requires a certain skill set to analyze this collection of data. One cannot look for facts or accuracy but for general relationships and themes that might not be obvious at first glance (Pope et al., 2000).

In quantitative research, the sought outcome is numerical values. The generated numbers must be summarized and analyzed. Any additional analysis is based on these findings and established patterns (Lacey & Luff, 2001). The same goes for qualitative research. The amount and complexity of relationships and themes can, however, become extremely overwhelming. Not only is the preparation time-consuming, but the after-work such as transcription and interpretation, requires as much effort as the collection itself as Pope et al. (2000) add.

Quantitative research generates numbers. Qualitative research generates stories, sentences, words, and themes. The task of the researcher is to decode the narratives, find messages between the lines, and look for connections between the findings and problematization. There are no formulas that would generate the right and objective results. The purpose of qualitative research is to immerse oneself in the procedure and let subjective perceptions create unique and personal interpretations (Lacey & Luff, 2001). It is a process that uses a lot of intellectual energy, and the researcher is expected to open fully their mind to make this journey worthwhile (de Casterlé et al., 2012).

The qualitative approach of inquiry in this paper seeks to answer the question of “how” by focusing on interactions, storytelling, and a deep understanding of problematization. This research aims to collect stories that will be rich in content and will disclose the experiences of the data providers. By focusing on quality, there will be space to define and understand talent managers' constructions of perceptions of university graduates expressed by storytelling and narratives and deliver meaningful contextualization to the research question. The possibility to this extent does not exist in quantitative research and therefore, in this case, it would not be realizable to reach the depth of data using this approach.

4.2 Philosophical and Epistemological Foundation

Amineh and Asl (2015) explain that from the constructivist point of view, new knowledge always evolves from our current understanding. In other words, new knowledge is a construct of our previous knowledge. This process of learning is not static. The prior understanding is constantly questioned as it is subject to learning new knowledge. If the new occurrence deviates from the current knowledge, the latest understanding can be alternated to take in newly discovered encounters. What is meant by learning is not, however, a collection of facts. Rather, it implies conceiving objectives. When these objectives are reevaluated and new ideas are in disagreement with prior thoughts, the learning can be considered successful. The learner is then placed in a position of constructing unique interpretations resulting from their own experience.

One of Kukla's (2013) arguments is that humans, as a group or society, are responsible for this world. The reality people live in is a construct of human beings. Since reality is not created before social invention, an individual cannot stumble upon it without others. The relational focus is one of the key principles of social constructivism. That is mainly because of its strong emphasis on rejecting individuals as separate systems because they operate within various networking groups and communities. People within a social context shape each other's thoughts and behavior through interactions, which implies that in order to understand an individual's behavior, the environment and relationships have to be considered (Andrew, 2012). The influence of relational focus can also be seen in identity formation. Relationships hold an outstanding position in the sense of ourselves and the development of our identities. The roles we establish in different relationships influence how we perceive ourselves, as well as how others perceive us (Buckingham, 2008).

Another key principle of social constructivism is the use of language and discourse. In this theoretical framework, discourse is seen as a language connected to a positioned activity. Through this exchange of language, people construct concepts. This framework provided by discourse allows people to build their worlds and enables them to understand the meaning of their personal experiences. Dialogues and narratives would not exist without linguistic exchange, making discourse an essential actor in social constructivism (Andrew, 2012).

4.3 Approaches

In most cases, the inductive approach is recognized as a suitable partner for qualitative data. The purpose of this approach is to summarize an extensive amount of data and form it into a brief and aligned summary. The inductive approach facilitates the development of theory based on the core structure of collected experiences (Thomas, 2003). To identify key themes and topics, the research question is used as a leading tool (Azungah, 2018). It is common practice that key topics are reframed or hidden from interviewees due to presumptions in the data collection (Thomas, 2003).

At this point, it is necessary to reflect on the research journey as not all steps were conducted inductively. The deductive approach is based on a preexisting theory that is tested through data collection. The analysis then confirms or contradicts the hypothesis (Azungah, 2018).

Based on this definition, there are steps conducted in a deductive way. Even though there is not any specific hypothesis tested in the research, there are guiding propositions used and discussed through the theoretical framework. Therefore a mixed approach is used which is fundamental in forming new knowledge and navigating the research question.

4.4 Perspectives

Originally, the terms emic and etic were used in linguistics to distinguish between the underlying system of language inside a speaker's head and the observable sounds produced by speakers. In the field of research, emic stands for qualitative, and etic for quantitative (Markee, 2013). Concerning its origin, the emic perspective takes the position of an insider within a researched group. On the other hand, a researcher following the etic perspective is an outsider who observes the group from a distance. When researching social problematization from an insider's perspective, the researcher aims to understand the phenomenon as the group members see it through their perspective (Azungah, 2018).

Based on the previous choice of the qualitative approach, it might seem that the emic perspective should be the unequivocal perspective. Nonetheless, these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. In order to explore the social context and relate findings to broader theories, it is crucial to use the etic perspective as an extension of the emic. The reason is that taking a step back and involving the etic perspective will establish connections between individual stories and wider societal structures (Markee, 2013).

4.5 Strategies

4.5.1 Interviews

The choice of interviews as a tool for data collection was a natural result of previous decisions on research design and theoretical framework. Since a qualitative approach is employed and adheres to social constructivism, interviews—specifically semi-structured ones—are a highly suitable strategy for gathering data.

Researchers Bell et al. (2022) acknowledge a correlation between semi-structured interviews and the philosophical position of social constructivism. This position asserts that reality is a social construct interpreted subjectively through the participants' perspectives. Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility for cross-checking and validating previous interviews. However, this flexibility is often criticized because it may yield inconsistent information that is difficult to compare across cases (Azungah, 2018).

On the contrary, Lewis-Beck et al. (2004) disagree with this criticism, arguing that such variation enriches the understanding of each case, prioritizing richness over standardization across samples.

This perspective is reflected in the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the data collection strategy. The interviews were guided by a set of predetermined general questions which were:

“How to attract university graduates?”

“What do they value the most? Why?”

“What do usually university graduates expect when entering the workforce?”

“What challenges do university graduates mention?”

Nevertheless, the flexibility was leveraged to explore details through follow-up inquiries. Striking a balance between structure and flexibility empowered participants to articulate their perspectives on subjective perceptions of realities. The primary objective was to comprehend perceptions of university graduates constructed by talent managers during recruitment. Semi-structured interviews facilitated dialogues that revealed diverse knowledge among the interviewees, which emerged through interactions with others. During the interviews, respondents frequently referred to university graduates using terms such as “Gen Z, new/this/today's generation, Generation Z, young(er) employees/people/professionals/applicants, fresh graduates, juniors, and new employees”. This language was noted but not considered as a relevant finding for the analysis.

In the following table, you will find an overview of the interviewees.

Table 1

Initials of the respondents participating in the interviews, their professional experiences, and the length of the interviews

Initials	Length of the interview	Experiences
A	55 min	Employee relations, strategic staffing
N	1h 10 min	Headhunting, talent acquisition, strategic HR, DEI ambassador
L	1h	Recruitment, talent acquisition, HR transformation, consultancy
J	50 min	Recruitment, HR and team leadership, employee performance management

It was aimed to find a min. of four respondents whose stories would provide insights into constructing their perceptions. To find the majority of the interviewees, the linear snowball sampling procedure was used. This technique involves selecting a representative from the target group who then recommends other potential respondents, creating a chain reaction or "snowball effect" (Goodman, 1961; Etikan, 2016). Snowball sampling is a non-probability method that is particularly useful for accessing participants who are difficult to reach (Naderifar et al., 2017).

The initial reason behind this decision was the lack of connections among HR professionals. I relied heavily on one contact and initiated the technique with my only acquaintance working

in HR. Fortunately, after the interview, he recommended another connection who agreed to be interviewed. Subsequently, this new contact also recommended someone else, resulting in three participants through the snowball technique. Unfortunately, the process stalled after the third interview, as the fourth potential interviewee did not respond. To revive the snowball, it was reached out to several talent managers on a professional social media platform. Despite contacting over thirty individuals, only one responded. However, this respondent could not suggest additional interviewees after the discussion.

Based on this experience, the snowball sampling procedure proved indispensable in the data collection, allowing gathering of information from these participants that would have otherwise been inaccessible.

4.5.2 Focus Group

To get deeper insights into the research question, another tool for data collection was included. The focus group was conducted after the interviews to elaborate on some topics and get richer data. Considering another method enhances the validity of the research through triangulation and amplifies more complex understanding (Thurmond, 2001). Unlike during interviews, the idea behind implementing the focus group was to maintain dynamic interactions among talent managers that could possibly reveal their views affected by social context. That observation would positively contribute to the learning of how perceptions are constructed.

Focus groups usually have a minimum of four participants that share characteristics of the debated topic (Morgan, 1997). It is pivotal to remember, as Krueger and Casey (2014) say, that focus groups are not meetings for people to let them talk. A focus group is characterized as a small circle of people who have certain characteristics in common and participate in a focused discussion to help better understand the problematization and generate qualitative data. Ultimately, the purpose is to gather opinions.

For this research, four participants were chosen to be a part of a focus group. Two of them, participants A and N, were already present during the interview round and were contacted again to engage in a group discussion. The other two, the participants M and D were firstly contacted to join the group of respondents for the interviews. However, they expressed their interest in participating in the research after the deadline for collecting data from the interviews. Therefore they were offered to contribute to the topic in the focus group.

As the interviews generated a fair amount of data, the primary goal of the focus group was to elaborate on it and gain a deeper understanding. Although, new themes and diverse

perspectives were welcomed which was a reason to combine both previous and new respondents. Another reason was to combine the benefits of both groups such as continuity and newly discovered perspectives (Morgan, 1997).

The discussion of the focus group was held online on Zoom and lasted 45 min. An overview of the participants can be found in the chart below.

Table 2

Initials of the respondents participating in the focus group and their professional experiences

Initials	Experiences
A	Employee relations, strategic staffing
N	Headhunting, talent acquisition, strategic HR, DEI ambassador
M	Recruitment, talent acquisition
D	Talent management, training and development, HR consultancy

Themes that were brought up were, for example:

- Interaction with candidates during interviews
- Critical factors in the hiring process
- CV and cover letters

Even though a focus group appeared as a suitable approach, there were limitations. Time constraints of the participants did not allow them to run a discussion longer than 45 min. Based on the body language of some (such as checking time), it seemed that they preferred shorter and brief answers to fit in the predetermined time frame. On the other hand, most of the discussion was straight to the point which generated useful information on how the managers' perceptions are created.

4.6 Choices

As no other approach than qualitative was used in this thesis, it implies that a mono-method was chosen. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) describe this choice as suitable for constructivism due

to its quality-based paradigm. However, some authors view the choice of a mono-method as research suicide, believing that to avoid being counterproductive, mixed methods are the correct approach (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). On the other hand, Kelle (2008) warns against the trend of combining methods at all costs. Often, there is no clear rationale for mixed methods, and the findings do not appear coherent. He acknowledges that each method has its limitations and strengths but combining them does not compensate for these.

4.7 Time Horizons

The cross-sectional design is used to describe a population within a specific time frame, aiming to identify patterns at a given moment. One of its main benefits is time effectiveness, allowing researchers to swiftly move from data collection to analysis. Furthermore, this design requires no ongoing engagement with participants, minimizing the risk of dropouts (Cummings, 2017).

The choice of a cross-sectional time horizon in this paper is based on the research question, particularly focusing on the perception of university graduates constructed by talent managers in recruitment.

4.8 Data Collection

As already mentioned, stories are the backbone of this thesis, so data were collected mainly through storytelling.

Stories embody spaces where we act and, at the same time, are exposed to the actions of others. We tend to re-story our experiences, so we always encounter subjectivity. However, this subjectivity is always in flux and shaped through negotiation and interactions within shared spaces with others. As human beings, we need to make and tell stories because we want to feel that what we do matters (Jørgensen, 2022). Bayer and Hettinger (2019) even see storytelling as part of our DNA, as it has always been present in societies. Stories bring us together. They can take the form of an anecdote or a narrative, for example. According to these scholars, narratives have the role of documenting and explaining. Most of the time, the terms 'storytelling' and 'narratives' are used in close connection. In this paper, it is distinguished between these two sources, and besides storytelling, narratives reflect another channel for sharing stories. Narratives can represent transcripts that serve an informative function and may lack the setting found in storytelling. Narratives are social products, not actions. To uplift these narratives and their purposes, researchers should be aware of

ethnographic perspectives. When storytellers analyze narratives, they not only tell them but also engage with them. Storytelling shapes the understanding and meaning of stories based on the listener and therefore provides a unique experience (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

4.8.1 Hermeneutics

Since storytelling is a source of various perceptions, researchers oftentimes consider interpretative studies, such as hermeneutics. Hermeneutics raises social and critical questions about how our entrenched interests in gender, age, or previous notions influence how we interpret texts (Thiselton, 2009). There is no unified opinion on what hermeneutics truly is. For some, it is a science, a methodology, a skill, or an art. Schmidt (2016) concludes that regardless of how we categorize it, hermeneutics fundamentally deals with interpretation. If interpretation is essential for our understanding, then all people should possess this skill to some extent, as we typically aim to understand each other.

Apart from the more obvious connections to storytelling and the interpretation of stories, hermeneutics underpins the entire initial idea. This involves understanding smaller parts of the research, such as the perception of university graduates (from the viewpoint of talent managers), by first grasping the broader picture of constructing these views. On the other hand, understanding the complexity requires examining these smaller elements. Understanding moves back and forth in a loop, known as the hermeneutic circle (Schmidt, 2016).

4.9 Limitations

Even though the chosen methodology was a great fit for addressing the research question, it does have its limitations.

Firstly, subjectivity. Interviews and focus groups are subjective tools for data generation. Despite aiming to analyze and interpret them objectively, I am aware that my perception of objectivity will always be subjective. Myers (1993) points to this reality by saying “There is an objective reality out there, but we view it through the spectacles of our beliefs, attitudes, and values” (p.34). Similar research built on data collected via quantitative techniques, such as surveys, would help to provide a more general and objective perspective.

Secondly, there might be response bias. As the interviews and the focus group were not anonymous, the respondents might have provided socially desirable and expected responses. Data collected anonymously might generate dissimilar insights.

Additionally, this research is dependent on the timeframe in which it was conducted, and therefore replicating it in a different period will likely yield varying results. Future research would have to take into consideration the historical perspective.

Finally, the sampling method for interviews might be a limitation. The reason is that the snowball method does not let the researcher have a direct influence on the choice of respondents since the researcher is dependent on the recommendations of the interviewees. For further research, it could help to consider a sampling method that supports having more strict criteria for choosing interviewees allowing a stronger influence on the choice of participants.

5 Analysis

Data collection is only halfway to the finish line. As Pope et al. (2000) mention, careful transcription and detailed interpretation of qualitative data are key to identifying topics and presenting findings.

In this analysis, two sources of data collection can be found. The first is interviews and the second is a focus group. Both methods were conducted with HR professionals experienced with recruitment as part of talent management. Each interview was recorded, followed by a private summarization and noting down keywords that stood out and, eventually, were repeated. During the focus group, a similar approach to data collection was applied. As the last step, themes and topics from the interviews and the focus group were assigned to the guiding propositions leading the research. The analysis part is therefore structured into three sections corresponding to the propositions and under each proposition, there are complementary themes embodied. The propositions are as follows:

Proposition One

Recruiters' perceptions of university graduates are significantly influenced by observational learning processes, where past interactions and experiences with candidates inform their current judgments.

Proposition Two

The effectiveness of signals sent by university graduates, such as resumes, cover letters, and interview behavior, plays a critical role in shaping recruiters' perceptions of their fit within the organization.

Proposition Three

The unique characteristics and values of Generation Z, as highlighted in the literature review, significantly influence recruiters' perceptions and expectations, affecting their assessments of fit within contemporary organizational environments.

5.1 Proposition One - Observational Learning Processes

5.1.1 Diversity and Inclusion – Global Citizens

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) have become terms that are rarely mentioned without each other. Diversity is about being part of groups that are different from those considered conventional in society (Barak, 2015). While a lot of research has been dedicated to diversity, inclusion needs a more solid foundation. Inclusion is the effort to enhance work processes and culture to support the potential worth of diversity (Shore et al., 2011). Respondent M shares:

As a part of our recruitment process, we have a group activity to see how the applicants work in teams. And especially for young candidates, it is not unusual to mingle quite easily and naturally. No matter the mother language, the color of their skin, the nationality... I mean, it might sound strange to mention this but ten, fifteen years ago it was more common to see groups of people with similar backgrounds.

Respondent D adds their view:

It is not strange actually. From what I can see, I think that applicants used to be “scared“ to pair with unfamiliarities whereas today it is quite the opposite as they seem more “curious“ about everything new.

In the context of P-O fit, SCT represents a valuable tool for understanding how recruiters construct their perceptions of potential employees by observing and interacting with the candidates in the organizational environment.

Based on observations, respondents M and D see a shift in the behavior of university graduates today vs a few years ago. The shift is towards a global context, curiosity in new cultures, and inclusive behavior. Braskamp (2008) defines people mirroring this change as global citizens. That is someone aware of how to interact socially with other people without highlighting cultural differences, someone who expands their network with people of various cultural backgrounds and enjoys learning about cultural differences.

5.1.2 Gendered Occupations

Respondent J reveals that she has encountered some stereotypes regarding traditional occupations.

“HR hires a lot of diverse juniors. (...) In tech companies, it is less important who you are. Girls CAN be programmers, and female graduates sometimes face this stereotype.”

The presence of women in technology can raise someone's eyebrows, as this field is male-dominated. Nevertheless, the times are changing, technology is still increasing, and more women are entering this industry (Prescott & Bogg, 2013).

5.1.3 Work-Life Balance

“In our company, we have significantly more young applicants for 0,8 FTE positions than for regular full-time,” respondent D reveals.

Respondent A comments: “We don't offer 0,8 FTE but I can see that a possibility of hybrid work is very attractive for people between 25 and 30 years old.”

FTE (Full-time equivalent) is a metric used in staffing to determine the workload. It counts with the total amount of hours worked per month. If 1 FTE is 40 hours, 0,5 FTE is 20 hours, etc. (Dahlan et al., 2021). FTE is one of the initiatives to secure work-life balance. That includes benefits or working conditions that enhance a balance between work and non-work domains. Even though work-life balance is considered to be one of the biggest challenges for HR, it is profitable to invest in these initiatives as they increase organizational commitment, job satisfaction, productivity, and job attractiveness (Darcy et al., 2012).

5.1.4 Social Media

It does not come as a surprise that people are spending more and more time using the internet and being online. It transforms our daily habits, such as listening to music, reading, working, studying, and shopping (Vilhelmson et al., 2016). Technology affects all industries, and HR is no exception. It impacts how HR recruits, retains, educates, and motivates employees. Common practices now include working from home and having international teams due to the possibility of online communication (Stone et al., 2015). Social media has amplified the significance of interaction and relationships and has become a loyal partner in spending (or wasting) our free time (Serbanescu, 2022).

Respondent N is aware of the spread of social media but doesn't see any difference in the number of users among age groups.

One of our recruitment strategies is to post vacancies on social media. The aim is, however, not only to target the young audience. I show statistics about social media where it shows that the number of users of social media is exactly the same between ages 13 to 30, I think, and 43 to 56. So when I talk about it, I say the older generation uses social media as often as the younger generation. Generations just use different platforms for different stuff. So all the old guys and girls still send funny cat videos to each other or share photos with their grandchildren eating ice cream while the younger generation makes funny dances on TikTok. We all use our phones, just different platforms.

5.1.5 Job-hopping

Job-hopping is the behavior of an individual who frequently changes their job due to various motives (Zahari & Puteh, 2023).

Respondent N shares that:

When we recruit university graduates, I don't see them as potential job-hoppers. Job-hopping is a myth. It is not true, but there are narratives from the media that create negative perceptions. There is actually research showing that people do not quit jobs

more often than they did a few years ago. In fact, the tendency is even decreasing. But based on the narratives from the media, the perception of university graduates is pessimistic and negative.

The article respondent N is referring to shows that young people, in general, do tend to change jobs, but there is no radical change in the percentage of job-hopping compared to thirty years ago (Casselmann, 2015). Subin (2021) adds that the rate of job-hopping is decreasing, which could cause serious harm to many companies. This is because job-hopping is an indicator of a strong economy. Another positive aspect of job-hopping is that younger workers demonstrate they work on themselves to gain new skills and build a strong competitive advantage against other job applicants, Subin (2021) believes.

5.1.6 Professional Development and Continuous Learning

Respondents A and N express their opinions:

To hire new young talents, it is usually because they show their potential to work on themselves, get better, move higher, and gain new experience and skills. (resp. N)

How do they show it? (resp. A)

They participate in training, webinars, workshops.... And actively seek new opportunities. (resp. N)

Maybe they have no other choice if they want to keep up with the pace. We also hire talents with potential. But their potential is expressed throughout focusing on and improving in their current job and position and doing it the best way they can. (resp.

A)

The respondents touch upon a topic mentioned already in the literature review, talent and potential respectively. According to Silzer and Church (2009), potential is defined as the possibility of enhancing current skills to achieve a desired result. For companies, to identify the best fit, it is necessary to identify what the potential is expected to be for. The desired result can vary. It can either be continuous career development or learning to fulfill requirements for a certain position.

5.2 Proposition Two - Effectiveness of Signals

5.2.1 Digital Nomads

Respondent D talks about their viewpoint of digital nomads:

Every time I see the term “digital nomad” in someone's CV or cover letter, I'm a little disunited. The positive aspect of this experience is definitely the determination, productivity, managing connections even from the other side of the world and many others. However, I'm quite skeptical about the self-dependency. How well can they work with other colleagues? As digital nomads, they were their own bosses. Will they be comfortable with someone telling them what to do and when it needs to be done? Can we count on them in the long term? Even though I can find many positives, I'm still ambivalent.

Digital nomadism allows working from exotic destinations and can provide a work-life balance and a work-leisure lifestyle. Digitalism is the main part of nomadism as digital nomads are dependent on technologies and connectivity. It is considered a recent social phenomenon and a form of quickly expanding mobility attracting primarily young individuals who have a desire to combine travel and virtual work. These individuals are forming the assumptions of what is considered a good living. In many instances, they share their ways of living on social media (Šímová, 2023).

5.2.2 Social Media

Based on data from 2023, there are almost five billion active social media users, and each of the users spends an average of two hours and nearly thirty minutes on social media daily. Research shows that an average user can scroll through almost one hundred meters, roughly the height of the Statue of Liberty (Van Bavel et al., 2023). In general, the age group of current university graduates spends around seven hours in front of the screen looking for information, watching videos, or communicating with family and friends (Petrosyan, 2024). The question is what value it has for HR. Respondent N comments:

HR just knows that, depending on the source, between 70 and 85% of fresh graduates find a job they want to apply for on their mobile phone, where the process requires that you upload a resume, and that resume is often uploaded through a laptop. So,

there is the friction that applicants see a very interesting job on their way in a metro, or when they are exercising, but now they have to remember to apply for this job. They have to save it somehow because they need to wait until they are on their laptop to complete the application process. We also see an increase in dropout rates when applicants then have to upload documents and manually fill in the same information that they have just uploaded. It is not efficient in a way that HR loses too many candidates. HR spends too much time not making updated decisions.

5.2.3 Job-hopping

Respondent L believes that:

The thing is that the first impression HR gets from Gen Z is that HR cannot rely on them. If you see their CVs, fresh graduates change jobs every six months. And six months is the maximum! It's even such a 'wow' for the graduates. If they stay in one place for six months, they did something.

Zahari and Puteh (2023) clarify that job-hopping is not a new phenomenon but has become very common among younger employees in recent years. They note certain challenges with the new generation and the implications this has on HR. It starts with recruitment and choosing the right candidates while predicting their tendency for an early departure from the company. However, even more difficult is retaining young employees. The reasons young employees leave a company are usually related to higher expectations of achievement, recognition, earnings, and a better working culture.

5.2.4 Technological Proficiency

Respondent N comments on signals in CVs and interviews:

Seeing skills on a CV in Microsoft Office, Photoshop, and coding languages is no surprise anymore. It depends on the role, of course, but all university graduates mention at least some ability to work with technology. And you can oftentimes see it on their CV. The applications are not the "classic" white background and black font style but have various designs. (...) During interviews, it is clear that graduates are

familiar with most software and platforms we use such as Slack, Figma, Teams, and so on. If there is an unfamiliar digital tool, the young applicants seem to grasp them with ease.

Technological proficiency stands for technological skills used to communicate, gather information, produce content, and amplify thinking skills (Saad & Sankaran, 2020). The field of education is swiftly evolving and the presence of technology in higher education is significant and shapes students career paths. University students meet technology frequently during their studies and need to adapt to continuous technological implementations in academia. Students apply their skills to search in online libraries, attend online courses, interact with learning tools, and communicate with fellow students and professors. What used to be a bare advantage is now taken as a fundamental requirement (Huynh, 2024).

5.2.5 Communication Styles and Preferences

Respondent M thinks that:

One of the biggest changes regarding hiring today's university graduates is in the communication style. Short, straight-to-the-point communication is the winner. When I post a job offer on LinkedIn, the majority of fresh graduates do not bother with a formal email. When they have a question or just want to let me know about themselves they send me a message directly on the platform.

Also respondent A adds their input:

When we plan our interviews, we send out a form to the applicants to choose a time slot and a preferred way of participating in the interview. They can choose between an online meeting or in-person. We don't have any statistics but just off the top of my head, I don't recall many people under 30 meeting in person for an interview. And those people that come in person are almost always nicely dressed up whereas the applicants online don't put as much effort in it.

Communication styles are ways how people interact with others by words and non-verbally. It is a process of sending and receiving a message and interpreting the meaning. The styles, nonetheless, vary. There are stylistic differences that can cause misunderstandings, conflicts,

and confusion. To prevent any source of friction between the sender and the receiver, it is key to understand differences in communication styles and investigate learning about where the contrasts come from (Liu, 2016).

5.3 Proposition Three - Characteristics and Values of University Graduates as members of Generation Z

5.3.1 The Chaos Theory of Careers

Respondent A reveals their concerns about university graduates' career paths:

Sometimes it is quite tricky to guess what graduates want when they apply for a job.

Their paths are non-linear with a number of experiences and internships. Which makes them unique! But also it is difficult for us to assess the potential fit as we barely can predict whether this position is going to be just another “valuable experience” or a job they will dedicate a few years.

Respondent N replies that:

I see the non-linear path as an advantage. You can tell that this group of people is adaptable as they are comfortable changing environments. And they are open to new challenges. Surely there are some risks for us in estimating the next steps of their careers.

University students rarely know what they want to be, and the moment of realization usually comes after graduation. During their studies, students are often pessimistic about their future careers. However, after graduation, they become more optimistic and find job positions they enjoy. The authors of the research see a clear link to the “chaos theory of careers” (Kinash et al., 2017). Pryor and Bright (2014), the authors of this theory, present it as a comprehensive tool for career development. Their theory accounts for complexity, relation, change, and opportunity in dynamic career systems and the non-linear journey of individuals seeking development.

5.3.2 Diversity and Inclusion - Employee Resource Groups

Respondent A shares his perception of diversity and inclusion:

University graduates are also interested in diversity and inclusion initiatives because

HR hires many people with different backgrounds, and everyone wants to feel heard. (...) Our company has quite a lot of younger employees from South Asia, so HR established a network group for them to get in touch with colleagues with the same cultural background. (...) Even though employees from South Asia are a minority in our organization, we do not want them to feel isolated.

The respondent sees university graduates as people interested in diversity and inclusion initiatives. One of these initiatives is the aim to group people with similar backgrounds to prevent isolation. This HR initiative is also known as employee resource groups (ERGs). These unique groups are usually created based on demand from one or more employees. The purpose of ERGs is to provide a safe space, psychological safety, and support for their members. The outcomes of ERGs usually contribute to D&I goals, innovation, change, and personal aspirations (Welbourne et al., 2017). The existence of ERGs creates a positive company image and is an attractive factor for potential new employees (Welbourne et al., 2015). For the respondent, it is also a tool to ensure that everyone is seen and heard. He perceives the graduates as people with different backgrounds, mainly cultural, who want to ensure they will not be isolated, and that the organization will respect them.

5.3.3 Diversity - Intersectionality

Interviewee N perceives the term “diversity” as relevant to the characteristics of university graduates, as they are diverse in age, gender, and ethnicity.

“More and more juniors applying for a job today are unique combinations of age, gender, and ethnicity,” he believes.

It can be said that he sees university graduates through the lens of intersectionality as he admits that an individual does not have only one identity. This is understood by his use of the words “and” and “a combination” in terms of diversity and its types. Intersectionality does not define diversity with a single focus but rather as a mix of various identities (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Therefore, by defining a university graduate as a combination of different characteristics, the respondent perceives this group as people of complex backgrounds who cannot be simply defined by categorization. Inclusion and diversity cannot be handled by traditional thinking anymore, as we must perceive individuals in a broader context. Understanding intersectionality means considering that an individual of ethnic diversity can also belong to a gender minority, and we must act accordingly to provide an inclusive space

for all. To attract diverse talents and develop a sense of belonging and inclusion for diverse individuals, organizations should embrace intersectionality (Thomas et al., 2021).

5.3.4 Diversity - Cultural Intelligence

Respondent L links diversity with the curiosity of university graduates, but she also highlights that training is necessary to understand cultural differences:

University graduates have been living all their lives on social media so they know a lot about many people from different countries and cultures. (...) I know that they are very much into diversity, but at the same time, they need to be trained for it. They need to have more understanding of every single culture they are supposed to be involved in.

The skill that university graduates need to improve is cultural intelligence (CQ). This ability is highly demanded in today's world, where we are connected globally in both personal and professional lives. Cultural intelligence is the ability to adapt to a cultural setting that is different from our own (Li, 2020). CQ has become more relevant than ever, and mastering this aptitude is key to managing diversity in organizations (Nazarian et al., 2024).

5.3.5 Graduate Programs

Respondent N commented that graduate programs play a significant role in growth and development, allowing graduates to learn and shape their future career expectations. He said:

HR can see an increase in graduate positions and an increase in companies having graduate programs. And the reason for that is what HR calls The War For Talent. Every company wants to have the talent pipeline of getting the most ambitious brightest people in. (...) Some graduates ask about graduate programs before we hire them as they highly appreciate them because they can prolong the phase of their life where they are still learning, and growing but also because, in the graduate program, they are also exposed to some of the privileges that they are not being exposed to in a normal entry level. Such as workshops with other graduates or getting a mentor.

The respondent observed an increase in graduate programs as this initiative benefits both parties. Graduates want to learn and grow, while organizations want to recruit the best talent. To find the brightest university graduates, an organization must enter The War for Talent.

Writers Michaels et al. (2001) coined this term in a consulting firm McKinsey and highlighted its continuing relevance. The War for Talent refers to talented employees as critical drivers in organizations and key competitive advantages.

Respondent L believes graduate programs are useful but must be restructured to accommodate the needs of current university graduates. The traditional method of general training followed by job rotation is no longer appealing to young people:

Once corporates have this kind of program, maybe they need to review it based on what this generation needs. University graduates need more activities. They cannot sit behind a desk from morning until evening. They need to be active and achieve goals because they like to say “If I spend one month in a job, there was a project that I reached a certain point and achieved this target”.

Research from 2011 indicates that outdated programs and irrelevant structures with no connection to desired development are major reasons university graduates leave graduate programs (Latukha, 2011).

Respondent L adds:

HR has to learn to understand university graduates. Young people today are high achievers, impatient, and value honesty. HR cannot play with them anymore. (...) It's time for corporates to be clearer, more focused, and transparent. This could definitely help.

Respondent N shares that ambition and achievement are the main drivers for university graduates. To attract and retain the biggest talents, companies must accommodate their needs.

Graduates are very ambitious, which is why they choose to be part of the graduate program. (...) HR headhunts more graduates than other people. (...) Because when university graduates are so ambitious they also have this sense of “I need to progress, I need to go from consultant to senior consultant to manager to senior manager.” That's when the real war begins and who is able to accommodate these ambitions better, wins.

5.3.6 Personal Career Plateau

However, not all respondents see university graduates as significantly more ambitious or

necessarily hungry for steep career growth.

Respondent A has the following opinion.

I think the perception of university graduates as ambitious, passionate, energetic, and I don't know what else is overrated. (...) Young people do not always strive for promotion. When they find their position meaningful and enjoyable, they like to stay there.

Analyzing this interview, it is clear the respondent is familiar with a narrative they don't agree with. According to their responses, university graduates prefer meaningful and enjoyable work over career promotion. Farivar et al. (2023) describe this state of mind as a personal career plateau. People who prefer personal career plateaus lack inclination for promotion even when available. This can have many explanations, such as focusing more on mental well-being, avoiding the pressure of climbing the organizational ladder, and enjoying personal roles and competencies more than generalist roles. There is a demand to redefine career success to include individual meanings, with a growing tendency to prioritize subjective over objective career success. University graduates today prioritize meaningful jobs and a supportive social environment over salaries (Ngoc et al., 2022).

“Graduates don't work for money. Remember that. They do care about money but don't work only for money. HR cannot manipulate them with money anymore,” respondent L observes.

5.3.7 Social Media

Respondent L admits that social media is present in the lives of all people, but current university graduates have a remarkably stronger relationship with it:

Social media is part of human lives. And for today's generation, it's even more important because it's the biggest way to interact. HR has to consider this and find the potential to use it in its favor. That's very important. HR cannot take social media away from Gen Zers. If you take it from them, I think they will destroy the whole

world. Social media is not like a hobby or a piece of their life. It is their life itself, and HR has to understand the importance of this and these platforms.

5.3.8 Digital Habits

Respondent L seconds that the digital world plays an important role in HR activities, and as respondent N mentioned, if HR stays constant, it risks consequences:

I was reading that nowadays nobody puts an advertisement in the paper anymore.

University graduates are using platforms. HR is seeing the change, and HR has to go with the flow, otherwise, it will lose.

Pichler et al. (2021) highlight that going with the flow and adjusting to current university graduates is a critical step. They believe that embracing their habits in technology will show support for their strengths and values. If they prefer to communicate with the team online, instead of pushing them to in-person meetings, they should be allowed to express themselves by using quick reactions such as emojis, videos, or memes. Even though this recommendation might seem extreme, it can result in satisfaction and more authentic feedback as the generation can stay in its natural environment.

Respondent A describes that older employees also have their natural environment, and technology influences the preferences of his team:

Our company works with software, so basically everyone has to be on-site. But where I see a difference is in activities that do not require an online presence. During COVID-19, applicants were forced to have interviews online, we had to communicate online, and also training was impossible in person. When we came back after the pandemic to the office, most of the employees my age were excited about meeting in person, personal interaction, and just doing stuff that allowed them to take a break from the screen. However, the younger generation still prefers the online way of doing things, online interviews, for example. That is the biggest gap I can see.

There is a gap between offline and online interactions, Schroth (2019) reckons. Online presence is vastly spread, and that is why people might forget about the fundamental communication skills in person. Not only in organizations but in general, there is a need to

obtain interpersonal skills that can hardly be learned without face-to-face communication. When people avoid face-to-face interactions, they lose the ability to listen, build relationships, solve problems in real time, and resolve conflicts. The point is not to get rid of online communication completely; it is about helping younger colleagues understand that there are other, maybe more effective, ways to interact than e-communication.

Nevertheless, respondents A and N have not yet come to a unitary approach that would work for all.

Respondent A:

HR and university graduates need to find some compromises as HR struggles with what has worked until now versus what is convenient for the new generation. It is hard to choose one solution suitable for all.

Respondent N:

My opinion is that individuals expect that their needs would be accommodated. I can just say that the biggest ongoing debate we have in HR now is how much HR should adjust to those expectations.

Respondent L, on the other hand, believes that university graduates will not adjust to current styles and will challenge the status quo. HR should shape itself:

I don't think university graduates will adjust. I think they will change all of the norms. They are already doing it. (...) HR has to understand them. HR has to change the training ways.

Finally, respondent J has the opinion that university graduates should take the offer as it is or leave:

If you are a graduate and you say "I want to work remotely" but this company does not practice this approach, you should respect it. The company functions this way, and it is a part of the compensation package. They give you experience, salary, benefits, and something else, and you give them your time, attention, and your time in the office. So, you, as a graduate, either accept this or look for a company that is more open to remote work. It doesn't necessarily mean that HR or the company is correct, though.

6 Discussion

6.1 Intro

The research denotes several findings on how a perception of university graduates is constructed by talent managers in the recruitment phase. The research was guided with the help of three propositions and a theoretical framework. The main framework is represented by P-O Fit Theory together with two supporting theories – SCT and Signaling Theory. These supporting theories have enhanced the depth of the research and P-O Fit. More specifically, the depth and robustness of the research are discussed through objective, subjective, and perceived fit which are the main approaches of P-O Fit. Additionally, the findings and their relation to the research question are also discussed through SCT and Signaling Theory.

6.2 How the findings relate to P-O Fit Theory

6.2.1 Objective fit

The first researched objective fit is a result of observation during a recruitment process. The perception is constructed on specific characteristics and behavior observed throughout group activities. The behavior included collaborating with different cultures and nationalities. As reviewed earlier, diversity plays a crucial role in the everyday lives of current university graduates (Pichler et al., 2021). There is a comparison from a few years ago that aims to strengthen the objectivity of this statement. Another objective fit during a recruitment process was mentioned regarding gender and highlighting objective figures for a fit such as skills.

The next objective fit is regarding preferences for 0,8 FTE which are higher in a group of younger applicants. Consistent with Deloitte's (n.d.) research, this finding also suggests that work-life balance is favorable among this age group. This quantifiable measure denotes a tangible fit between the job characteristics and the fondness of applicants.

Skills such as Microsoft Office, Photoshop, and coding languages mentioned on resumes are considered an objective fit in the assessment of job qualifications. Consistent with Ask and Søråa (2024), this finding also suggests that one of the most distinctive social changes influencing professional sphere is technology.

As reviewed earlier, current university graduates like to save time and effort by sending brief messages (Rue, 2018). Findings in this paper expand on that by showing that when it comes to university graduates and their communication styles, there is an observable change in preferences. The change is in contacting the managers directly through the channel where a job application was posted rather than sending a “formal email” as one of the respondents

commented. This shift is relevant for “the majority of fresh graduates” which acknowledges that this objective perception is driven by a specific observation and tangible data.

Seeing university graduates as diverse has its foundation in observing verifiable characteristics such as age, gender, and ethnicity.

Another quantitative data forming a perception of university graduates is based on their attributes and the job requirements. This perception is supported by statistics and the percentage of applicants that find friction between their preferences and the requirements of job applications.

The change from advertisements of the printed form to job offers posted online is related to objective fit as the shift is measurable and observable. According to previous studies, the shift has been influenced by technology as it is still ongoing and spreading at a rapid pace (Ask & Søråa, 2024). The acknowledgment of adaption to this change is grounded on the objective conclusion of behavior present in the job market.

6.2.2 Subjective fit

Gathered data related to a recruitment process also generates a subjective fit. Specifically, the fit results from an individual subjective observation commented as “from what I can see” and “I think”. The understanding is constructed by a personal experience and an internal assumption generating the perception of university graduates as “curious”.

Subjectively, university graduates are perceived as interested in diversity and cultural competencies. This perception is shaped by beliefs about the level of cultural knowledge and expectations of training and improvements in this area that the graduates should have. These findings align with previous research by Racolța-Paina and Irini (2021) indicating that current university graduates do not have sufficient knowledge of soft skills such as cultural awareness.

Another result of an observation creating a subjective perception is that people between 25 and 30 years old are interested in hybrid work. This view is made by an individual understanding rather than facts and data.

Subjective perspective is also a matter of talent and potential. As observed in a dialog in the focus group, opinions on how to define these terms vary and every talent manager sees “a talented graduate” through different lenses. As explained earlier by Silzer and Church (2009), it is impossible to define talent and potential as the terms have many possible definitions depending on individual understandings.

As researched, the perception of university graduates as digital nomads is subjective. More specifically, the fit is supported by concerns as well as subjective, internal conflict about whether the graduates with a past of digital nomads are a suitable match for organizations.

The communication style of university graduates is a subject of a subjective fit. The perception is created by personal judgment and an individual's memories as well as own explanation behind dressing for interviews.

Subjective fit is also present in constructing perceptions of university graduates and non-linear career paths. The perceptions are the results of internal assumptions expressed by phrases such as “it is quite tricky to guess what graduates want” and “I see the non-linear path as an advantage”. Characteristics of university graduates as “adaptable” and “open to new challenges” are subjective as they are personal perspectives.

A perception of university graduates as interested in the initiative of Employee Resource Groups is constructed subjectively as this perspective arises from a belief that “everyone wants to feel heard”. However, this opinion is an individual reasoning.

Personal career plateau as an attractive choice for university graduates is a result of subjective perception. That is by naming characteristics and motivations ascribed to university graduates and subjectively evaluating their accurateness.

Similar to Rue (2018), one of the findings also describes how tightly current university students are tied to social media. The significant importance of social media in the lives of university graduates is an outcome of personal opinions and therefore a subjective perception. That is strengthened by a belief that HR should adjust to the influence of social media, nevertheless, this recommendation is not supported by any tangible evidence.

There is an inclination of university graduates towards online communication and interactions showed already during recruitment. That perception is formed by personal observations and assumptions that are not supported by any data and therefore this perception of university graduates is constructed subjectively.

Even though there is not a unitary opinion on the matter of university graduates adjusting to HR and vice versa, the perceptions appear to be created subjectively. Some are subjects of individual observations, others are personal beliefs. There are subjective suggestions on what actions each party should take in order to create the fit.

6.2.3 Perceived fit

The perception of university graduates in terms of social media is formed by a perceived fit. This opinion is built on external sources that affect the considered understanding.

Another perceived fit relates to the relationship between university graduates and the tendency to frequently change jobs. In this case, again, there are external influences, such as narratives in media, that the respondent is aware of. These narratives are perceived as negatively portraying university graduates and contradicting data from research. The perception lies in stereotypes and generalizations such as “you can't rely on Gen Z”. This perception is constructed by general belief as it does not involve one's own viewpoint or objective facts.

The perception of university graduates and their appreciation of graduate programs is constructed by a perceived fit. That is shaped by a belief that graduates seek graduate programs as they allow them to prolong the learning and growing phase that graduates know from university. This perception affects the programs that are adjusted to these perceived desires. The reasons why graduates fancy graduate programs are formed by characteristics subjectively ascribed to the graduates.

6.3 How the supporting theories relate to the findings

6.3.1 SCT

By choosing SCT as a supportive theory, it was possible to deepen the understanding of views built during recruitment. In this process, it was observed, that the behavior of university graduates shapes perceptions and reveals how they are constructed. According to SCT, the presence of diversity in the lives of graduates is assessed by their curiosity and natural behavior shown in interacting with fellow candidates of different nationalities, skin color, or mother language.

In the topic of gendered occupations, SCT is a suitable theory as the researched material directly supports the core principles. Learning by observing, self-efficacy, and the influence of environment on shaping behavior and beliefs. The construction of a perception in this manner is shaped by hiring diverse graduates no matter gender as they are perceived as equally capable.

The observation of 0,8 FTE and hybrid work reveals the source of perception of university graduates and their relationship with work-life balance. The company's openness to 0,8 FTE and hybrid work creates a supportive environment for young applicants. At the same time, it produces a perception of preferences toward work-life balance.

It is observed by one of the interviewed talent managers that both groups of younger and older applicants use social media, however, there are different preferences in used platforms. This observation is crucial for deciding on recruiting strategies and ensuring their effectiveness in attracting university graduates. That is a foundation for creating a perception of university graduates as a group of people who use social media as often as everyone else. This knowledge relates to the decision of where to post vacancies to attract the desired audience. The environment of social media affects recruitment strategies as talent managers are aware of its spread and aim to reach an optimal fit.

There is a perception constructed by media that university graduates are job-hoppers. Nonetheless, based on observation and research, one of the talent managers refuses the narratives and has their own perception constructed by learning about this topic. By mentioning narratives from social media influencing the respondent's perception, the interview material demonstrates external factors contributing to the construction of these perceptions.

A perception of university graduates and their potential is partly constructed by observing their participation in activities such as training, webinars, or workshops. The perception is influenced by the self-efficacy shown by university graduates through their proactive approach and the aspiration to improve and develop their current skills.

6.3.2 Signaling Theory

One of the signals that university graduates send out to talent managers is listing digital nomadism on some of their CVs. This signal provides many various interpretations and makes one of the talent managers ambivalent. While the term signals interpretations such as determination and productivity, it is also understood as a likelihood of inability to work in teams and under authority. A perception of university graduates having an experience with digital nomadism is constructed by multiple interpretations of the term.

University graduates' CVs, cover letters, and behavior during interviews represent significant signals forming perceptions of talent managers throughout recruitment.

These qualities (Microsoft Office, Photoshop, coding languages) as signals have an influence on recruiters' perceptions of university graduates and their fit for the organization. At the same time, these technological competencies are the subject of the observational process confirming the relation to SCT.

Signaling Theory regarding social media indicates that university graduates are comfortable using smartphones to find job opportunities. The mentioned friction in finding a job on a

smartphone but the necessity to apply from a laptop signalizes a presence of inefficiency in recruitment and potential dropout rates of university graduates. The discord can signal that graduates appreciate efficient application processes and updated recruiting procedures. The perception of university graduates favoring efficient application process is constructed by interpreting these signals sent by graduates throughout applying for vacancies. The signals are friction in the application process and increasing dropout rates.

Another perception of university graduates as job-hoppers is relevant to Signaling Theory. The perception is constructed by signals such as staying in a job for no more than six months as mentioned in applicants CVs. This signal is strong enough for one of the talent managers to perceive university graduates as unreliable.

By using Signaling Theory for communication styles of university graduates it is aimed to reveal how a perception of graduates is constructed based on interpretations of their communication preferences. Firstly, the perception can be constructed by a belief that university graduates favor short and direct communication as that is a signal one of the talent managers receive during recruitment. Secondly, the perception can also be constructed by interpreting the graduates' behavior as informal. That is because the talent manager commented on the choice of communicating via a social media platform as the unwillingness of university graduates to “bother with a formal email”. Lastly, the perception can be constructed by a perceived formality of the dress code chosen for online interviews frequently used by university graduates.

6.4 How the P-O Fit and the supporting theories complement each other

The results of this research were explored through guiding propositions and discussed by applying P-O Fit supported by Social Cognitive Theory and Signaling Theory. This strategy aimed to provide a clear and focused theoretical framework to investigate characteristics of talent managers' perceptions of university graduates during recruitment. Following the main theoretical framework helped in identifying key factors in creating perceptions from the organizational point of view. Adding two supporting theories resulted in a comprehensive theoretical integration which allowed us to explain how the perceptions are constructed. After discussing the findings, a few patterns can be observed.

Firstly, social media is frequently a predisposition to a perception of university graduates constructed by talent managers during recruitment. However, it is doubtful to clearly claim how this perception is constructed as, in this research, it is a subject of observational process,

signals, and characteristics of Gen Z in literature. Additionally, the nature of these views can be objective, subjective, and also perceived.

Secondly, diversity and inclusion were mentioned in many cases, however, the complexity of these terms led to various understandings and multiple sources for these perceptions. The fit can be seen both objectively and subjectively.

Thirdly, most of the characteristics of university graduates mentioned by the talent managers are results of subjective observation or as a perceived fit. Therefore, the characteristics are often seen as contradictory.

7 Conclusion

The research aimed to find out how the perception of university graduates is constructed by talent managers in the recruitment phase.

Based on the qualitative analysis of interviews and a focus group with talent managers, the theoretical framework of P-O Fit, and two supporting theories, several findings can be concluded.

Firstly, based on the qualitative material, perceptions of university graduates constructed by talent managers in the recruitment phase can be categorized into three groups. The perceptions are constructed through an objective, a subjective, and a perceived fit.

Secondly, the foundations of these fits matter on the sources of perceptions that were studied by applying SCT and Signaling Theory as supportive theories.

The findings indicate that the source of perception matters, as the main disparities appear between objective and subjective fit. These findings, however, would not have arisen or had depth without using a combination of interviews and a focus group as part of a qualitative approach. This approach was chosen to gain a better understanding of constructing perceptions about university graduates from the perspective of talent managers through storytelling. This was achieved by allowing the stories collected during interviews and a focus group to play a central role in this paper.

The quality and richness of the data demonstrate that the chosen theoretical framework and methodology were highly effective in addressing the research question. That allowed us to clearly demonstrate how a perception of university graduates is constructed by talent managers in the recruitment phase.

For practical implications, it is essential to differentiate between the sources influencing talent managers' perception of university graduates to avoid biased attitudes in recruitment. The research identified discrepancies between constructing perceptions via objective, subjective, and perceived fit as well as constructing perception based on observation and signals. As demonstrated by the research, talent managers construct their perceptions of university graduates on various foundations. It is necessary to acknowledge the nature of the perception and its source. Taking into consideration complex backgrounds of viewpoints can positively contribute to understanding and learning about the origins of perceptions that talent managers have of university graduates.

Academic implications relate to the literature gap. Specifically, insufficient literature about current university graduates belonging to Generation Z. Nevertheless, as the research showed, it is crucial for talent managers to invest in understanding university graduates, and factors shaping their habits and preferences in order to use the knowledge for efficient recruitment.

This research studied constructing perceptions through P-O Fit providing valuable data from the perspective of talent managers. This theory, however, also enables exploring a fit from the opposite point of view. Therefore, for further research, it is advisable to give a voice to university graduates and study the fit from the other perspective.

This research contributes to understanding how the perception of university graduates is constructed by talent managers in the recruitment phase. It challenges current literature about generations and delves deeper into talent managers' perceptions of university graduates by exploring the roots of the viewpoints. By exploring current hiring practices and factors influencing recruitment, this research delivers timely and relevant material. Enriching the literature, this research produces valuable insights from talent managers, thereby providing first-hand data on the construction of perspectives on university graduates during the recruitment phase.

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