

Employee selection practice in the mirror of discrimination



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Recent study has been prepared by Telakka Bt. entrusted by the Equal Treatment Authority in the scope of its project called „TAMOP 5.5.5/08/1 Combating Discrimination, Shaping Societal Attitude and Strengthening the Work of the Authority”.

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Our study aims at answering the question whether some aspects of discriminative selection practice may be identified in the employee selection practice of Hungarian employers. The study assessing the selection practices of employers overviews the steps of getting a job, from the perspective of both employers and employees. Getting a job is preceded in the first step by browsing the job announcements, as well as by obtaining a job through either formal or informal channels. With regard to this, we assessed the discriminative contents of job announcements on the one hand, using the announcement monitor of a data collection in 2009 and those job announcements that were regarded as discriminative by employees. On the other hand, we mapped those recruitment ways on which employers are searching for employees for either intellectual or physical activities.

Our analysis makes use of results of both (1) quantitative and (2) qualitative methods of analysis.

(1) Using the questionnaires filled in by employees our aim was to assess in which fields employees were discriminated against in their workplace (wage, working conditions, and promotion). From the question block related to the so-called „forbidden questions” filled in by employers there is evidence to whether during the job interviews they ask questions regarding child bearing, origin, political or religious affiliations, and if they do so, what is the reason or goal lying behind this practice.

(2) Focus group analysis allows us to understand better the motivations and viewpoints of employee selection practice. The focus group discussions conducted with employees with young children, middle aged employees and university students offer an insight into the employees’ opinion on discriminative job announcements, and on the stereotypes on different occupations.

The main results of the study are to be summed up as follows

1. Recruitment: informal channels and the notable role of notifying

The quantitative data of 2010 show that Hungarian employers prefer using personal contacts in their recruitment process.

The analysis of leaders’ questionnaires shows that the use of **informal** channels (such as personal relations or recommendation of colleagues) is almost as important in the recruitment process as that of formal channels (such as job announcements, job mediation and job fairs).

Employing new staff, making use of informal channels is an important addition to formal channels, what is more, it can be considered even the substitute of formal channels, and this confers the employment process the possibility of increasingly taking into consideration the subjective aspects. The **practice of notifying** was also affirmed by the focus group discussions organized with employers.

The main message of Table 1 is that employers recruit to a considerable extent via informal channels (in the market sector, to an extent of 30-50%) and they interview the employees not pronouncedly according to a standard criteria set appointed beforehand.

Table 1: By what information channel did you contact the last two persons employed, for both intellectual and physical work? (market sector, percentage)

		Recruited for intellectual work	Recruited for physical work
	<i>N</i>	693	958
FORMAL CHANNELS	Through job announcement in local, regional or countrywide newspaper, or in professional magazine	23	24
	Through announcement on the internet	26	9
	Through announcement on poster, notice board	1	1
	With the collaboration of the labour branch office	9	17
	With the help of school/college/university career advisor	2	0
	Through paid private job mediation agency	6	1
INFORMAL CHANNELS	Through internal announcement to the employees on site	4	5
	With the help, respectively recommendation of colleagues on site, through acquaintances	20	28
	Through oral information on job vacancy	6	11
	In other ways	3	3
	Altogether	100	100

2. The direct and indirect evidence in support of discriminative selection practice

The qualitative research (focus groups with employers) has pointed at the discriminative selection practice of vulnerable labour market groups (first and foremost, the Roma), a result which was confirmed by the focus group research carried out among employees and by the representative data collection as well.

- (1) Although the majority of employers did refer to a criteria set appointed beforehand, serving as the basis for job interviews, one decisive element of these criteria was the practice according to which applicants are scored and evaluated on different subjective factors, following which employers only meet those candidates who had already passed this first filter. It has unequivocally turned out that the first impression, the appearance and neatness during the personal conversation is highly important in the selection process.
- (2) In the introductory parts of the focus group discussions on chance equality in general, the employers' and employees' manifestations have been analyzed. Regretfully, a large number of discriminative comments on Roma have been found, the essence of which is that the majority of employers does not and would not gladly employ Roma people. Beside this, some dismissive attitudes on people with young children and on middle aged people can also be traced. The arguments behind these negative attitudes are various. Most typically, participants claim that it is the free choice of the employers who they employ, with whom they would like to collaborate, especially when it involves their own firm. Although these subjective considerations do not appear

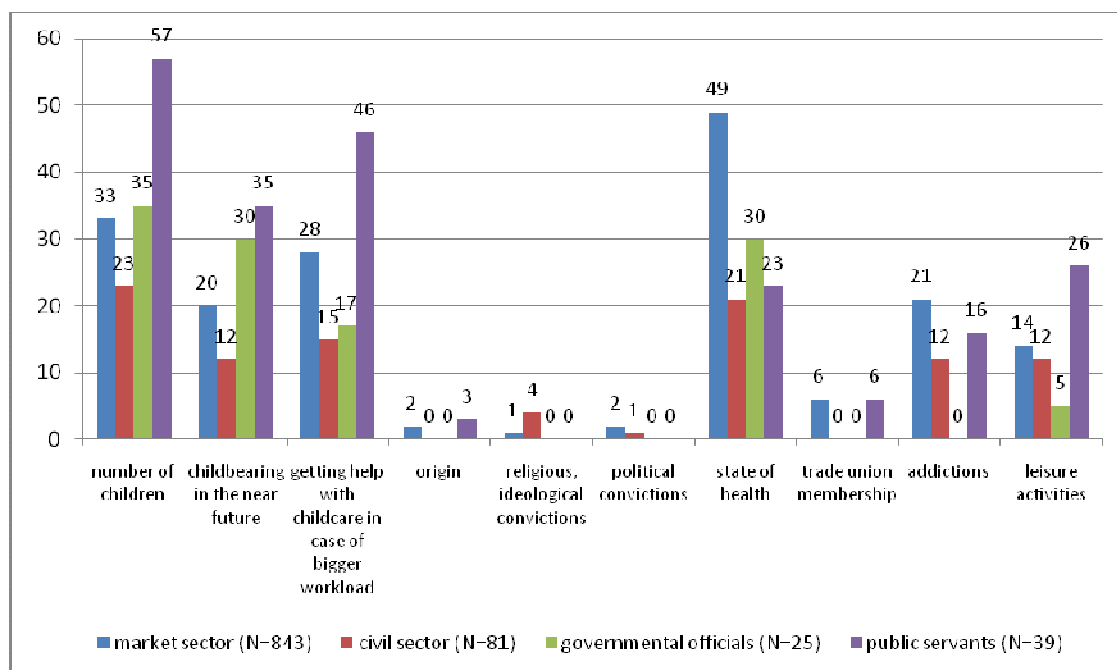
either in the job announcements or in the criteria set appointed beforehand, employers decide freely following the personal meeting with the applicants. Beside these arguments, other arguments based on taste and those already known from the economic literature on statistical discrimination are also to be found in the manifestations we studied. According to discrimination based on taste, a particular group is being favored because it is supposed that the employer, the potential buyers, the partners and the colleagues would also favor them. This type of discriminative practice has also been reinforced by the focus group discussions with employers: it has been affirmed many times that the division leader or the chief executive enacts to the HR-officer that he/she is not allowed to employ a person of Roma origin in the division. The employer adopting statistical discrimination refers to his/her previous negative experiences and does not select from vulnerable labour market groups due to such experiences („the person does not like to work”, „he/she will not arrive on time”, „his/her child will get ill”). (This type of argumentation in the case of the single employee characteristics was also supported by the so called forbidden questions’ analysis.)

With regard to the Roma, the decisive employers’ opinion is that it is not worth investing in them, giving them the chance of getting a job, since at the end they would „disappoint”, they quit on the short term if they do not like the work, or if the work load is too big, they claim to be ill („if there is straining work, it is sure that someone in the family dies or gets ill”).

Nevertheless, to the entire picture also belongs the insight that with regard to people with young children and to middle aged employees, positive views are dominant: it is worth to invest in this type of workforce, since despite of the negative expectations, , the investment would pay back on the long run. The reason for this argument is presumably the indirect or direct personal involvement of the leaders.

The quantitative analysis of questions „suitable for being asked” and those really asked at job interviews shows that the so-called forbidden questions are asked more frequently at interviews in the public and competition sector, and less in the civil organizations. (Diagram 1)

Diagram 1: The Proportion of Workplaces Asking Forbidden Questions in the Different Sectors (percentage)



Analyzing the forbidden questions along the protected characteristics, the most important evidence is that while questions on potential employees' marital status and childbearing are relatively frequently asked (this is most true for public servants), questions regarding origin, religion, ideological or political convictions, and trade union membership are few in number in all four sectors. Further, frequently asked questions during job interviews regard the state of health, addictions and leisure activities.

Despite the fact that the Law on Equal Treatment uniformly prohibits and considers as directly discriminative questions regarding private life, partnership, family life, planned childbearing, sexual habits, home, origin, religious and political orientation, wealth, state of health, during job interviews, – except when the question is justified by the nature of the work –, we assume a different employer attitude with regard to the different question groups.

According to our presumption, most employers and HR-specialists are not aware of the fact that asking questions on marital status and childbearing is against the law, and they consider these issues as important regarding the work to be done by the applicant. Were they aware of the legal regulations, they would either not ask such questions or would definitely not report on this practice to such a large extent (Diagrams 2-4).

Diagram 2: Reasons for Asking about the Number of Children in the Different Sectors (percentage)

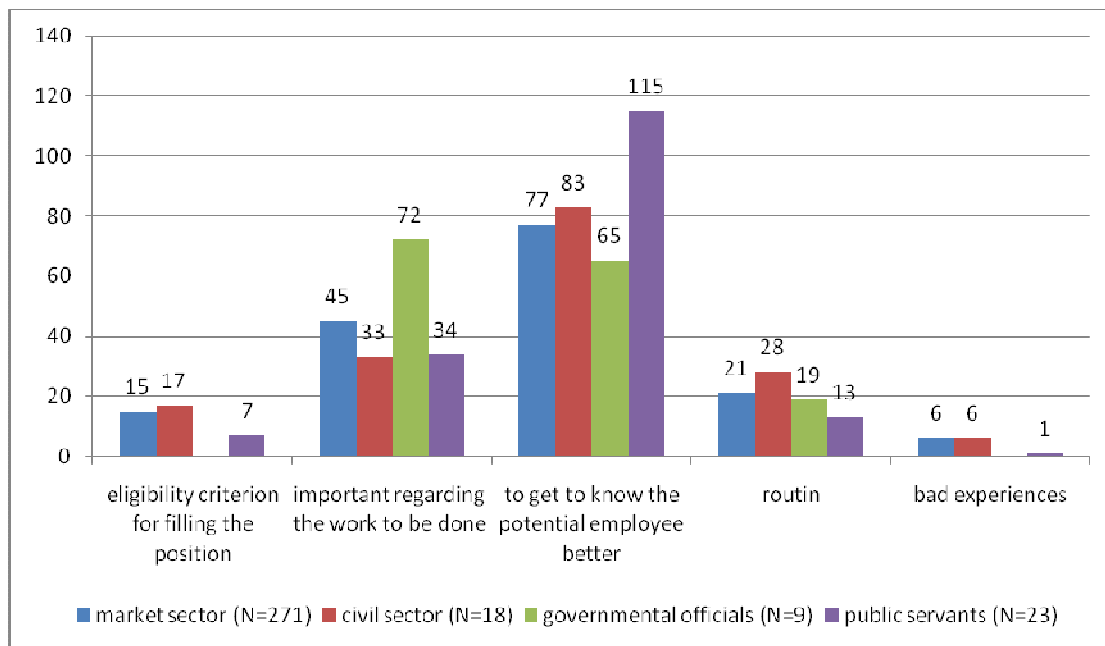


Diagram 3: Reasons for Asking about Childbearing in the Near Future in the Different Sectors (percentage)

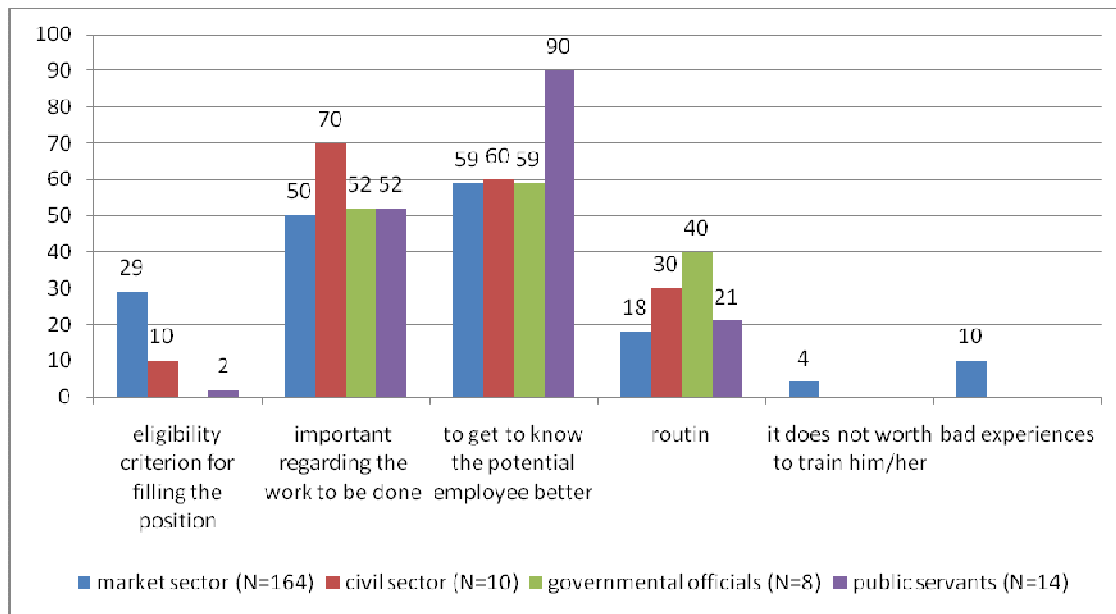
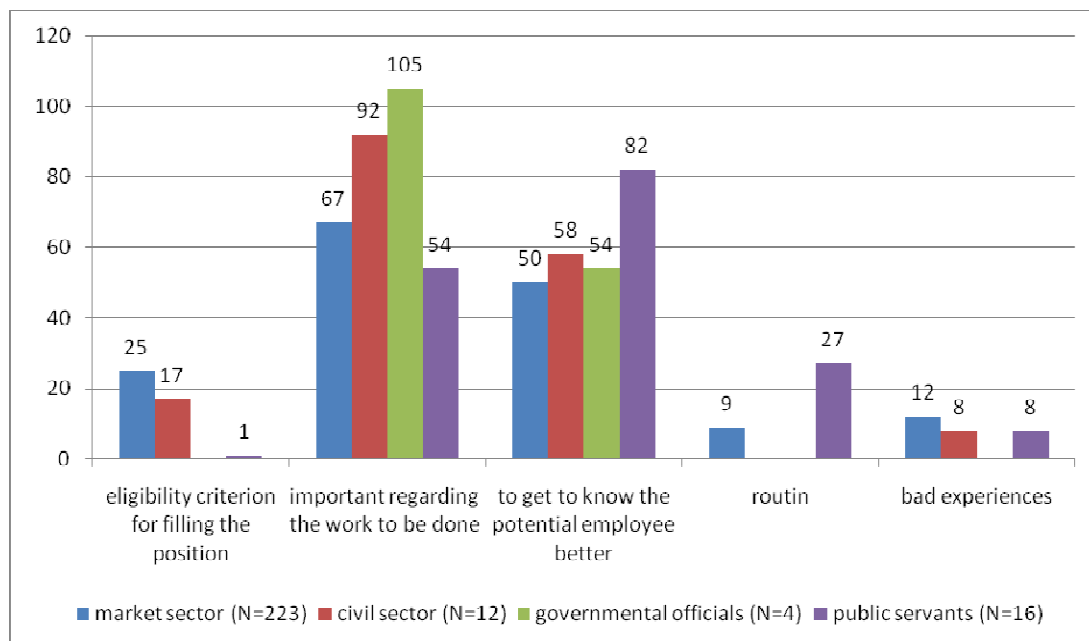


Diagram 4: Reasons for Asking Applicants with Children about Getting Help with Childcare in Case of Bigger Workload in the Different Sectors (percentage)



The negligible proportion of questions regarding origin leads us to conclude that, on the one hand, the taboo-character of this question has already become a part of the public consciousness (this presumption is also supported by the fact that job announcements do not include a specification on the origin), on the other hand, the „visibility“ of Roma origin makes asking this question unnecessary. The experiences told in the employers' focus groups also reinforce this recruitment practice: namely, that in case of many companies (first of all, in factories and manufactures in the market sector), „it has been ordered“ not to take workers of Roma origin in the employ of the division leaders, despite the fact that in some cases the HR-officer does not agree to this extremely discriminative employer practice.

Further, according to the results of the analysis, questions regarding the state of health are asked because this issue has a true eligibility role in filling the vacant position (according to three out of four leaders in the market sector, who had asked this question, the state of health was an eligibility criterion for filling the position). The question on addictions might have quite practical reasons: smoking leads to pauses during working time and increased health risks, alcohol consumption causes poor work achievement and unreliability.

The relatively high number of questions regarding leisure time activities are merely „harmless“ and presumably do truly serve the scope of getting to know the applicant better, as most leaders claim.

3. Job Announcements with Discriminative Content

In the focus group discussions one task of participants was to select those announcements which can be regarded as discriminative, or problematic in the sense of differentiating among applicants from the complaints which had been sent in the past years to the Equal Treatment Authority and from job announcements in the Hungarian announcement magazine called *Expressz*.

In the groups of university students, middle aged employees and people with young children, differing reactions have been traced. For these differing reactions, the two main explanatory variables have proven to be awareness and personal involvement.

The different levels of awareness and deliberation in the groups of different composition were palpable, which is due to a large extent to the level of education. In some groups, even interpreting and interiorizing the concept of discrimination itself was difficult, whereas other groups (such as students in Budapest) were „at ease“ with the topic and easily gave voice to their differentiated views.

Whereas people with young children proved sensitive to this topic mainly due to personal involvement, and students conceived of the task quickly and approached the problematic elements from various viewpoints, middle aged employees managed to know their way among announcements somewhat more difficultly, and were fearful in using the term discrimination.

It is also important to state that when participants in the focus groups had realized what the main point of the task was, their attitudes generally changed and they managed to find the problematic statements with good instinct. In social psychology experiments, this effect is called the process of participant maturation, or the effect of measurement. Within this exercise which reminds of training elements, this process of maturation was traceable in more groups, in other words, discussions had a well-shaped arch, starting from the first spontaneous reactions until the last more conscious enumerations, and along this arch, participants underwent a process of interiorization.

On basis of these facts it is presumable that trainings currently held within the program, which, just like focus groups, also contain a chain of exercises of sensitization, together with legal information and case discussions, play a remarkable role in fighting prejudices, assessing discrimination cases, and in raising awareness of the concept and importance of chance equality.