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Getting a low-paid job in French and UK supermarkets: from walk-in to online application?

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Getting a low-paid job in French and UK supermarkets: from walk-in to online application?

Low-paid job
in French
and UK
supermarkets

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to compare the recruitment practices of the French and UK retail industry. It analyses the influence of specific business constraints, labour market institutions and employment patterns on recruitment practices. It devotes attention to incidences of the shift from classic to web-based hiring methods.

Design/methodology/approach – The cases of two leading food retail chains are explored. This research draws on a mixed approach using semi-structured interviews, the analysis of online job-advertisement content and web sites.

Findings – According to the literature, local and informal hiring channels (walk-in application, word-of-mouth, in-store adverts) are mainly used to fill low-paid vacancies in food retail chains. They are congruent with the key screening criteria as they allow face-to-face selection and provide candidates from the surrounding area. However, the food retail chains in this research have implemented a centralised and at-a-distance process which contrasts with the classic methods. Based on an “Internet-only scheme” and online testing, it is especially selective in the UK.

Research limitations/implications – The number of semi-structured interviews is limited. Additional investigations are needed to evaluate whether the at-a-distance processes are isolated or whether they reflect growing practices.

Practical implications – Retail food employers have to maintain a diversity of local hiring channels and not to indiscriminately embrace the at-a-distance scheme, which is not adapted to evaluate the key requirements.

Social implications – A centralised and at-a-distance recruitment process decreases unfair face-to-face discrimination in selection but at the same time introduces indirect discrimination. This process may be interpreted as a way to target students; there is a risk that it exacerbates inequalities in low-wage labour markets.

Originality/value – The topic is poorly explored. There is a need to understand web-based recruitment.

Keywords Labour market, Recruitment, Communication technologies, Employees, Case studies

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Despite the current recession, the retail sector remains one of the largest sources of employment in European countries. The centrality of retailing to understanding the changes in employment patterns and working conditions is widely accepted, but retail work needs to be explored further (Bozkurt and Grugulis, 2011). A closer look at

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recruitment practices is especially needed, and this contribution investigates and compares the methods used to fill low-paid positions in large food stores in France and in the UK.

This paper contributes to the literature in two ways. First, the retail sector is known for its reliance on short and informal recruitment methods and soft skill requirements, with variation according to the subsectors (Carré *et al.*, 2010; Nickson *et al.*, 2012; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). However, recruitment procedures as a whole have been poorly explored. Drawing on the literature, which considers that a large part of the labour market selection takes place through information channels (Granovetter, 1974; Holzer, 2005; Larquier and Rieucan, 2014; Marchal *et al.*, 2007; Rees, 1966), this paper devotes attention to the way hiring channels target and select applicants and to the links between hiring channels and filtering criteria. It addresses the incidence of online selection for low-wage labour market functioning and exclusion. Second, according to international comparative work, the labour market is more flexible and more part-time-job oriented in the UK than in France, and the search within the labour market is reputed to rely more on formal methods in the former country than in the latter (Bachmann and Baumgarten, 2012; Lloyd *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, it is worth teasing out the influences of the national labour market institutions and employment patterns as well those of the specific business characteristics of retail on the UK and French retail-firm recruitment decisions.

This paper is organised into five sections. Based on a literature review, the next section highlights the main similarities and differences regarding French and UK employment patterns and recruitment practices in retail food. The third section presents the methodology of the research, which draws on a mixed approach using semi-structured interviews, the analysis of online job-advertisement content and an online forum in the UK which facilitates discussion between employees and students searching for a shop-floor position in retail. The fourth section analyses the recruitment process in two national leading retail food chains, which recently changed their methods by implementing a centralised and at-a-distance system. Discussions and conclusions are presented in the fifth section.

Literature background

Institutional factors to explain differences in employment patterns

The retail sector represents approximately 8 per cent of the total labour force in France and 10 per cent of the total in the UK. In both countries, firms have had to face strong competition in prices and pressures on labour costs. In food retail, the number of large-scale establishments has been growing, and the hours of operation have been extending beyond standard daytime to include weekends and public holidays. Increasing part-time work has been the most common instrument used by retailers to adjust staffing levels based on customer flows (Jany-Catrice and Lehdorff, 2002). In both countries, approximately four in five retail part-timers are women; obtaining a part-time job in a store is reputed to fit with their family arrangements. Retailers are also keen on recruiting students, who are reputed to learn quickly and work hard with little protest. Their expectations to hold a job without commitment to a career accord with the need employers have to increase part-time and unsocial working hours (Benquet, 2013; Canny, 2002; Hart *et al.*, 2007; McGauran, 2004; Nickson *et al.*, 2004).

Despite common trends, a level of divergence remains between the two countries. Retail companies have developed an intense self-service system and a high level of task fragmentation and customer service features, related to limited knowledge about

products and extensive use of (substitutable) part-timers. Such trends exist in both countries but are more pronounced in the UK than in France. According to the Labour Force Surveys, part-time employment in the retail sector as a whole is higher than in the overall economy in both countries, but the proportion of part-timers in UK retail (50 per cent) was nearly double that of France (28 per cent) and the number of working hours is actually lower in the UK. In addition, the proportion of younger workers (15-24 years) employed in the sector was approximately 30 per cent in 2010 in the UK and 16 per cent in France, and the share of workers over 50 was slightly higher in the UK (22 per cent) than in France (19.7 per cent) (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2012). Because of the higher proportion of full-timers and long part-timers, there are more promotion opportunities in French retail (Carré *et al.*, 2010). Compared to the average for private sector services, the rate of turnover in retail is high in both countries, but retention remains lower in the UK (Chung *et al.*, 2012). Because of the poor quality of the jobs and the high level of turnover, in both countries employers may face difficulties attracting and retaining workers (Benquet, 2013; Hart *et al.*, 2007).

Labour market institutions bolster differences in the national employment patterns. Long and non-standard opening hours (evenings, nights and Sundays) are more prevalent in the UK, as the legislation regarding hours of operation is less restrictive than in France. Peaks of activity are more concentrated in France than in the UK (Askenazy *et al.*, 2013; Carré *et al.*, 2010). In other respects, the French universal child care system offers greater support for full time work, or even if part-time, a higher number of hours worked, for women with children, while in the UK, inadequate childcare limits worker-caregiver labour force participation. Trade unions in the sector are slightly more active in France, where they have organised strikes, mainly regarding wages, and in 2008 won a minimum hour threshold of 25 hours per week (Askenazy *et al.*, 2008). Student contracts are exempt from this legislation, and they can be contracted less than 25 hours. Relative to French workers, UK part-time workers appear more constrained in part-time employment (Gash, 2008). The more extensive use of part-timers who work only a few hours per week and the weaker power of trade-unions in the UK slightly decrease the possibility of negotiating individual schedules; in French supermarkets, employees have latitude to allocate shift amongst themselves, whereas in UK, shifts are stipulated by employers (Gregory and O'Reilly, 1996).

Wage policies also have a degree of divergence. In the two countries, the standard retail wage is the minimum wage (or just above), but at the timing of writing the minimum wage is higher in France (£7.66 per hour in 2013) than in the UK (£6.31 per hour in 2013). Incentive pay systems are reputed to have a greater impact on the HR policies in the UK than in France (Marsden and Belfield, 2009). Therefore, the UK youth minimum wage (62 per cent of the adult minimum wage) is a factor in the relevant demand for the youth workforce, while the need to supplement a (poor) pension offers a compelling explanation for the high availability of workers over 65 in this country (Mason and Osborne, 2008).

The screening criteria that matter

The country narratives describe fairly similar requirements for filling low-paid vacancies in retail, with some variations between sub-sectors. First of all, in food retail, as work starts at dawn and finishes late in the evening, close proximity and availability for unsocial working hours are critical (Carré *et al.*, 2010; Rieucan and Salognon, 2013, 2014). Employers regard commitment (flexibility, availability, self-initiative, etc.) as signals for the value candidates attach to work (Bailly, 2008).

In the overall retail sector, technological innovations and self-service have contributed to reduce the technical skill requirements: basic literacy and numeracy, the ability to fill shelves, answer customer questions, ring up sales and check out customers are required to hold a floor shop position; basic computer literacy to order products is also increasingly required according to UK employers' surveys (Hart *et al.*, 2007; Lloyd *et al.*, 2008). Despite such an ongoing demand, most of the technical requirements are more practical abilities than real technical skills. As a result, these skills are reputed to be easy to acquire through training and a diploma is not a strong criterion (Carré *et al.*, 2010; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). Technical skills differ from soft skills, which are sometimes viewed as innate or inherent to the personality (Bailly and Léné, 2013). Expectations regarding product knowledge – which is also technical skill – vary in accordance to the nature of the product being sold and the intensity of self-service. Product knowledge is expected to sell books (Chabault, 2010), electrical and electronic goods (Carré *et al.*, 2010) and, to a lesser extent, clothing and shoes (Leslie, 2002; McGauran, 2004; Nickson *et al.*, 2012). Such a demand for specialist knowledge has no parallel in the supermarkets, except for craft positions (e.g. fishmonger and butcher) and, to a lesser extent, counter assistants. However, the increasing number of products that arrive in stores pre-prepared and packaged reduces the requirement for accredited apprenticeship, even for traditional craft positions. In fact, to hold a counter position in a supermarket in the two countries, knowledge of product is very basic and previous work experience is welcome but optional, as on-the-job training is acknowledged to be undemanding (Benquet, 2013; Grugulis *et al.*, 2011; Rieucan and Salognon, 2013).

Research conducted in the UK and in France revealed that the retailers place great importance on employees ability to give good customer service and regard communication and emotional skills (e.g. having a positive attitude and service orientation) to be at least as important as technical skills or qualifications. Employee appearance is also essential for performing the job and therefore obtaining employment (Bailly and Léné, 2013; Cullen, 2011; Larquier and Marchal, 2014; Nickson *et al.*, 2003, 2012; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). Within certain sub-sectors, such as fashion retail, there will be a pronounced emphasis on workers embodying the product (see e.g. Leslie, 2002; Williams and Connell, 2010). However, in seeking to fill low-paid vacancies in food stores, the emphasis on “looking good” is less pronounced. Instead, emphasis is placed on a clean appearance, as illustrated by a French supermarket manager: “First, we need a neat person, someone who is wearing make-up, with her hair and her nails done [...] Not a girl who comes with dirty sneakers and greasy hair” (quoted in Rieucan and Salognon, 2013, p. 58). As elsewhere, the focus on soft skills in supermarkets might reinforce discrimination based on social, gender or age stereotypes. It might be related to the motivation to recruit young people – especially students who are associated with the middle class and likely to have desirable skills – and women – as these skills are tied to standard female socialisation (Jany-Catrice *et al.*, 2005). Interestingly, the key criteria (attitude, looks, proximity) require face-to-face interaction to be assessed. As developed below, classic recruitment channels in retail allow face-to-face interaction.

The weight of informal and local channels that allow face-to-face interactions

Since the publication of seminal works by Rees (1966) and Granovetter (1974), it has been recognised that there is a diversity of information channels in the labour market: employment agencies, job advertisements, social networks, direct applications, etc. Rees (1966) distinguishes the employer's intensive search, which procures many details about a few applicants (networks) from the extensive search, which gives little

information about many applicants (job advertisements, employment agencies). The work of Granovetter (1974) illuminates the weight of social networks – especially weak ties – and the pivotal role of trust to tackle the uncertainty inherent in labour market coordination. Word-of-mouth is reputed to carry rich, updated and faithful information regarding the applicant qualities and the job characteristics. Several studies have indicated that the hiring channels in general shape labour market selection (Holzer, 2005; Larquier and Rieucan, 2014; Marchal *et al.*, 2007). Consistent with this literature, this paper considers that a large part of recruitment and selection takes place through information channels, which target and select applicants regarded as suitable. Therefore, attention must be devoted to the way employers and applicants interact and to the links between screening criteria and hiring channels. It is critical to distinguish face-to-face interaction (the application is hand-delivered) from at-a-distance interaction (the online application).

National Labour Force Surveys ask employees how they obtained their current job. For retail employees hired within the last three months, regardless of the type of contract and working time, these surveys indicate that in 2011, three out of four jobs in France and one out of two in the UK have been found as a consequence of a speculative inquiry or a social relation. One in three retail employees have found their job thanks to a job advert in the UK, but the figure is less than one in ten in France. Finally, neither in France nor in the UK do job centres represent a major job-finding channel in the sector (Rieucan, 2013). The weight of speculative applications and the limited role of employment agencies indicate that a large proportion of the employees conducted the job search on their own.

Results from previous research in this area highlight the diversity of the channels employers and job seekers can use and describe how channels work. To fill low-paid vacancies, store managers are accustomed to using word-of-mouth and to soliciting their own employees as referrals, to receiving walk-in applications, displaying announcements in the shop window and advertising in local newspapers (Keeling *et al.*, 2013; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). Managers can also call former employees at very short notice to work for a specific time period (Mason and Osborne, 2008). Retail food companies publish job advertisements on their corporate web site, but online applications are often used in conjunction with other traditional channels, unless the process is “Internet only”.

Several arguments can explain why walk-in applications, word-of-mouth and window adverts remain popular channels in the food retail sector. From an employer view, these “in-store channels” are inexpensive; they provide continuous candidates and narrow their number to reasonable proportions by targeting people who live close to the store. Candidates from the neighbourhood do not face commuting delays and will likely accept nonstandard working hours (Rieucan and Salognon, 2013, 2014). Furthermore, store managers infer commitment from the job seekers who apply directly to the store. The local dimension is also crucial for job seekers who are reluctant to search for a job far from home because of family responsibilities and the lack or cost of transport commodities as well as psychological barriers (Nickson *et al.*, 2004). The selection occurs in the store, and it is undertaken by the managers and assistants who work there. They are not HR specialists, but they have a good knowledge of the local labour market and can manage the recruitment as they deem appropriate. It is generally considered that their “feeling” is decisive (Lochard and Ughetto, 2006; Manning, 2000).

Screening based on the applicant appearance and behaviour are frequent when applications are hand delivered; therefore, there is a relevant risk that unfair judgement occurs at a very early stage, as the applicant has to “pass the first impression hurdle”

(Gatta, 2011, p. 59). However, the informal discussion may also be an opportunity for job seekers to enhance their applications and collect information about working conditions.

From this literature review, one can deduce that recruitment methods to fill front line positions in French and UK supermarkets are fairly similar. Technical skills to checkout and replenish shelves are required but the demand for product knowledge is limited to counter positions. Experience in the sector is a positive though is not essential to get a job. Applicants are also expected to have a clean appearance, have a service-oriented attitude, be available for unsocial working hours and live close to the store to be on time for work. Employers prioritise local channels (word-of-mouth, hand-delivered applications and in-store adverts), which are related to the characteristics of the food retail sector and adapted to a face-to-face selection based on the criteria that matter. Eventually, recruitment is for the most part undertaken by store managers. Similar to Lockyer and Scholarios (2004) findings for the hotel industry, there is little evidence of “best practice” recruitment and selection in food retail and a reliance on less sophisticated approaches. As developed below, a significant change in the recruitment process reveals differences between the two countries and impacts labour market functioning and exclusion.

Methodology

The cases studied concern two different retail food companies with similar characteristics. The two companies (one in each country) are present on the stock exchange, and both are one of the three largest retail food chains in their respective countries. According to data drawn from the companies’ annual reports in 2012, the UK company had more than 1,000 stores and employed 152,000 employees. Two in three were part-time employees. In 2012, approximately 100,000 employees worked in one of the 1,100 stores belonging to the French company. One in four employees was part-time. In both companies, a centralised process was implemented during the second half of the 2000s to fill all of the shop-floor positions in all of the superstores, supermarkets and convenience stores.

The research draws on several sources. First, a total of 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with recruiters, employees and labour market intermediaries (see Table I).

Code	Sex	Function	Workplace
<i>French case</i>			
FRR1	F	HR director (recruiter)	Headquarters
FRR2	F	HR director (recruiter)	Headquarters
FRR3	F	HR assistant (recruiter)	Central recruitment office
FRR4	F	HR assistant (recruiter)	Central recruitment office
FRR5	F	Department manager (recruiter)	Superstore
FRE1	M	General assistant (employee)	Superstore
FRE2	F	Customer service assistant (employee)	Superstore
FRI1	M	Agency director (intermediary)	<i>Pôle emploi</i> agency
FRI2	M	Recruitment adviser (intermediary)	Headquarters of <i>Apec</i> (organisation)
<i>UK case</i>			
UKR1	M	Store manager (recruiter)	Superstore
UKR2	F	Assistant manager (recruiter)	Superstore
UKE1	F	General assistant (employee)	Convenience store
UKI1	M	Recruitment adviser (intermediary)	Job centre plus
UKI2	M	Deputy manager (intermediary)	Public employment and training agency

Table I.
Interviewee
characteristics

This small sample of interviews was extracted from a larger sample (55 interviews) undertaken as part of a research project considering recruitment practices in retail, conducted in two urban, tourist and university areas: Greater Paris in France and Brighton and Hove in England. The initial French research took place in 2010-2011; it was supported by the French Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and the *Centre d'études de l'emploi*. The UK research took place in 2012 and was supported by Paris 8 University and Brighton University. For the purpose of the present research, only interviews regarding the two retail food chains are taken into account. The face-to-face semi-structured interviews lasted between 15 and 60 minutes and were taped and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were based on guidelines adapted to the type of respondent (recruiter, employee and intermediary). In addition, observation of the HR assistants working in the central recruitment office in France was also undertaken.

Second, a collection of online job adverts for the three main shop-floor positions (general assistant, customer service assistant and counter assistant) was extracted on the same day in November 2013 from the web site of each company, to be analysed for content. Job adverts are a relevant source for identifying requirements, and such a collection of data is especially adapted for pursuing a comparative perspective. After exclusion of the duplicate job offers, the sample consisted of 454 French job adverts and 329 UK adverts. Each job advertisement was coded for its job title and company and analysed with a freeware concordance programme (www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/software.html). Such software was used to perform text searches and to better find linkage between the coded job adverts. It was also used to identify the job characteristics in terms of working time, type of contract and salary. The requirements have been gathered in three categories: soft skills (relational and personal skills); technical skills; and autonomy at work. Descriptive statistics have been performed (Tables II and III).

Third, online discussions between employees and students searching for a shop-floor position in the UK retail chain have been examined (thestudentroom.co.uk). We did not find a similar or recent forum to illuminate the French case, but we decided to retain the

	Total (%)	General assistant (%)	Customer service assistant (%)	Counter assistant (%)
<i>French case – 454 job adverts</i>				
Part-time	38.7	22.8	72.9	27.8
Full-time	61.3	77.2	27	72.2
Total	100	100	100	100
Temporary	65.9	70.8	66.1	57.4
Permanent	34.1	29.2	33.9	42.6
Total	100	100	100	100
Total number	454	206	133	115
<i>UK case – 329 job adverts</i>				
Part-time	92.4	91.5	99	87.5
Full-time	7.6	8.5	1	12.5
Total	100	100	100	100
Temporary	67.5	80	80.8	27.5
Permanent	32.5	20	19.2	72.5
Total	100	100	100	100
Total number	329	166	83	80

Table II.
Characteristics of the
jobs (job advert
content)

ER 37,1	Company	Total	General assistant	Customer service assistant	Counter assistant
	<i>Relational and interpersonal skills^b</i>				
	FR	3.3 ^a	1.9	5.9	2.8
	UK	3.9	2	8	3.6
	<i>Technical skills^c</i>				
	FR	4.3	5.3	1.4	5.9
	UK	3	3.1	3	3.1
	<i>Autonomy at work^d</i>				
	FR	3.3	4.1	2.7	2.4
	UK	2.6	4	0	2.4

Table III.
Occurrence of requirements within the job advert content

Notes: ^aFrench job adverts contain on average 3.3 expressions related to relational and interpersonal skills; ^bFR, smiling; enthusiastic, friendly, sense of service, diplomatic; UK, friendly smile, courteous, enjoyable, enthusiastic, helpful; ^cFR, numerate, experienced, replenish shelves, tagging products, cleanliness; UK, provide advice, experienced, checkout, displaying products, cleanliness; ^dFR, sense of initiative, well-planned attitude, leader, reliable, teamwork; UK, can-do attitude, ability to work under pressure, maximise sales, flexible approach, teamwork

source because the threads that were explored allow us to supplement the job seeker point of view, which is difficult to obtain. As Janta and Ladkin (2013) noted such an “observation netnography” is useful to know more about job search and recruitment; indeed, online exchanges mainly take place between job seekers who are looking for advice and current employees willing to share their experience related to the recruitment process. Furthermore, the absence of a similar forum in the French case suggests that job seekers face fewer problems applying for a job in the French company than in the UK one.

Research findings

“Part-time: salary of £6.71 per hour”/“full-time: 13 months paid”

Drawing on the content analysis of the job advertisements collected (Table II) it would be expected that there would be evidence of better job quality in the French company as opposed to the UK one. Indeed, nine in ten jobs posted on the UK web site are part-time, while “only” four in ten are part-time on the French web site. These results coincide with the national employment patterns reported above. According to a UK manager, the focus on part-time recruitment is a strategy to maintain staff flexibility and productivity in a context of long hours of operation: “The less full-time people now, the better flexibility is. Because it’s so long in the day, and there’s so many hours that we are open, the full-time people are not good any more” (UKR1). In the two companies, the proportion of part-time is especially high for customer service assistant positions (the check-out staff). Two-thirds of the job offers are temporary contracts. The adverts were collected in November, and retailers are accustomed to recruiting temporary staff before the Christmas holidays.

According to previous cross-national job advert comparisons (Bessy and Larquier, 2001; Marchal *et al.*, 2007), UK job adverts are, in general, more informative about wages and working conditions than the French adverts. All of the job adverts extracted from the UK retail company indicate the wage per hour (youth or adult minimum wage). The French ads do not indicate the exact amount of the wage but refer to the pay or, more precisely, to the monthly pay. They indicate the pay-related benefits (employees are paid for 13 months instead of 12; they can receive pay bonuses). To a certain extent, job ads offer information regarding the firm-based collective agreement, as if applicants already belonged to the staff.

According to Table III, there are slight differences between the requirements for the same position. In both companies, relational and interpersonal skills (“having a friendly smile”, “enthusiasm”, etc.) are in higher demand for customer service assistant roles than for the others roles. Demand related to autonomy at work (“can do attitude”, “sense of initiative”) encompasses commitment in the sense of Bailly (2008). These qualities are especially required for general assistants in both companies; they are not mentioned in the UK job adverts for checkout staff. Technical skills (“provide advice”, “displaying/tagging products”, numerate) are required for counter and general assistant positions in the French case, but they are less frequent in the UK. The less frequent use of self-service in France might explain the stronger emphasis on these technical skills.

In general, French adverts are reputed to be more selective than in the UK, as they contain more expectations about education (Bessy and Larquier, 2001; Marchal *et al.*, 2007); the demand for a diploma is also reputed to be more common in the French labour market than in the UK (Bessy *et al.*, 2001). Meanwhile, within our research, neither the French nor the British job adverts mention a diploma. In this respect, the sector and business aspects (the diploma is not a hiring criterion in retail) go beyond national labour markets specificities (the diploma is a hiring criterion in France in general). Furthermore, one would expect the skills advertised in Table III to be less difficult to evaluate through face-to-face interaction or during a probationary period rather than through written documents such as the CV and application form. Such a result resonates with the literature but seems contradictory to the new hiring process implemented in both companies.

A process that enhances at-a-distance selection

The UK and French companies surveyed changed their recruitment scheme in the second half of the 2000s. Previously, they relied on the traditional hiring process. A central hiring office, located in Manchester for the British company and in Paris for the French company, is currently responsible for filling all of the low-paid vacancies in all of the stores belonging to the chains. The system is designed for day-to-day recruitment (for a store-opening, there are collective sessions). To our knowledge, the French company is the only food retail chain in the country to have undergone such a comprehensive change. In the UK, the case study organisation has become the first major employers to introduce an “Internet-only staff recruitment scheme”. According to the French and UK recruiters, the centralised process has been implemented to make the practice more “consistent” as well as to avoid unfair judgements based on appearances, which occur in the face-to-face interactions: “Before, it was: I don’t like this guy [...] I’m going to rush the interview” (FRR1). The new process was also meant to offer greater efficiency than the previous methods. Finally, the recruitment was centralised because shareholders were willing to reduce administrative costs. Compared to the traditional practices, the new process introduces an at-a-distance screening (Lagarenne and Marchal, 1995), undertaken by the HR staff and with computer devices, while face-to-face interaction between applicants and employers takes place at the end of the process.

In the French case, applications received or brought into stores as well as those from the employment agencies are scanned and sent to the central office to be examined by the HR staff, together with the online responses to online job adverts. In the central office, the HR assistants we observed mainly take into account criteria such as prior experience in retail, literacy and availability. In the UK case, candidates have to fill out

an application form online and to complete an online test. According to the literature, screening based on written documents prioritises signals such as diploma and experience and confers an advantage to a certain calibre of applicants and excludes at a very early stage those who have not the desirable profile to apply, such as the less qualified, computer illiterate and older job seekers (Green *et al.*, 2011; Lindsay, 2005; Marchal *et al.*, 2007; Parry and Tyson, 2008). With at-a-distance filtering, students are at an advantage, and the new system may be interpreted, in both countries, as a way to target people from this group.

There are certain differences between the two companies. Indeed, in France, the online applications have not completely overtaken the alternatives: applicants can leave their application at the store's desk reception (it will be scanned and sent to the central office), and the company still posts job adverts at the public employment services web site, by virtue of a national agreement. In the UK, applicants must apply exclusively online (at the company web site), and the public employment web site does not publish vacancies in this company. Applying online, the UK applicant has to complete online tests. The UK is traditionally known for its reliance on formal recruitment practices and equal opportunity policies and devices (Barnard *et al.*, 2002; Bessy *et al.*, 2001). The "Internet only" process and the implementation of online tests reflect a reliance on devices that is supposed to ensure the equal treatment of individuals. However, as Parry and Tyson (2008) state, the shift from traditional to online recruitment is not as simple as changing the advertising medium.

A process that reinforces the unbalanced relationship between employers and applicants
The new process reduces the potential job-searching channels, especially in the UK case, which is an "Internet only" scheme. A contradiction exists between equal opportunity policies, which promote the idea that all applicants should be treated equally, and the online channel, which introduces indirect discrimination against job seekers who are not computer literate. To ensure equal job opportunities, internet access in UK stores has been implemented, but in fact, neither self-selection nor computer literacy inequalities are resolved by this facility:

Before, it was all in the store. We could make the decision, but now, it's totally changed. Everybody is always looking for jobs in our company. Every week, I have people who want to give me their CV. I say "it's great, but I can't do anything with it" [...] It's difficult now for the older person. What we will say to someone who comes to the store is that we are happy to help them fill out the application, on a one-to-one. We can load it on the Internet for them if they want to. We can't answer the questions. But we can read the question and say "what does this mean to you?" [...] At the end, you're probably talking about maybe one in 200 persons, but it does stop a lot of people who are not computer literate (UKR1).

The recruitment process is interactive, but by changing the way job seekers and employers first interact, the centralised scheme reduces the possibilities for store managers and applicants to adjust their views. In France, after the first sifting based on the CV and cover letter, HR managers call the applicants selected for a short interview, which is supposed to follow a guideline draft by the HR managers. These phone calls could sometimes catch applicants unawares: "They called me when I was on the tube, and I completely failed the interview. They only asked me two questions related to the qualities of a good cashier, and I answered 'I don't know'." (FRE2). The same occurs with the assessment of the "interest" in the product: "For a vacancy of fish counter assistant, I called the applicant and asked him 'tell me about the specific relationship

you have with the product?’ and he answered, ‘I like fish, what else?’ Well, no way!’ (FRR3). The applicants who satisfy the phone interview must then attend a face-to-face interview with a store manager, who has only to accept or to reject the candidate. Store managers are no longer involved in sorting resumes or meeting the applicants who bring them, and some of them were unhappy with this new approach:

It was quite irritating; we have to recruit quickly, but we must wait for the central office to send an applicant. The new process was described as well-planned, designed to save our time, to rely on professional staff [...] But at the end of the day, the applicant sent sometimes didn’t even know for which job he applied (FRR5).

Job seekers no longer have opportunities to reach a recruiter in store and to collect information. The UK online discussion forum reports the problems applicants have understanding their chances to obtain the job after the test or the job interview as well as knowing the store to which they applied. The web-based process reinforces the unbalanced relationship between employers and employees and may be congruent with a strategy to maintain a high number of part-timers, as exemplified below:

I applied for a specific position with hours which suited me and was then offered the job, only to be informed by HR that they can’t offer those hours anymore. Since I was desperate for a job, I agreed to take a position with less hours. [...] In my store, all the jobs are part-time, mostly between 12 and 20 hours per week. Day-shift overtime is very rare, with many people fighting to get extra shifts (UK employee, online forum).

An online selection to sort faster paced workers

In the UK case, after a first screening based on his postal code and his right to work in the country, a candidate has to fill out an application form online. Potential employees have also to complete an online test, which comprises approximately 25 multiple choice questions. Assessment questions are based on scenarios designed to evaluate whether the candidates adopt the right attitude towards customers, their abilities to interact with colleagues and managers and to be available and flexible. Some questions are designed to test numeracy abilities. The rapid response expected may be related to the need for workers who are computer literate and able to be fast paced in checking out and filling shelves. Indeed, there is no true selection among the candidates who have passed the test, as only the first ones to succeed receive an e-mail for an interview in the store to which they have applied. In this interview, candidates have to complete a test, similar to the web-based test, and participate in a face-to-face interaction that includes general questions.

The tests reflect a confidence in HR devices and staff, which are historically prominent in the Anglo-Saxon countries (Dobbin, 2009). From a recruiter point of view, they also have been implemented to increase productivity, as they are supposed to: “improve the quality of the people hired [...] And I think it works a little bit. But also the recession, we have more skilled people also looking to go into retail” (UKR1). Online tests are for the most part accurate filters that narrow the flow of applications, which has grown with the current recession:

For all the hundreds of other people who apply, it depends on the first two people who got there. So that’s where they’re going now, they’re having that sort of control with these online applications. It’s not really helping everyone else who’s actually applying for it. So, that’s where the online applications take away from the face-to-face (UKI2).

The HR staff in the UK central office is less involved in the filtering process than the HR staff in France, as the online test ensures a large part of the selection. Such a device

is an efficient filter to reduce the number of the applicants interviewed and the implementation of the test may be interpreted as a way to reduce hiring costs. However, they also reinforce the selection, as only the faster candidates who pass are interviewed. In fact, the UK scheme is consistent with fragmented and few-hours part-time jobs, as advertised by the company, and accords fairly well with the idea that workers are extremely substitutable and interchangeable.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper reveals several findings. On the one hand, it highlights the respective influence of the characteristics of the sector, the employment patterns and labour market institutions on the firm-based recruitment decisions. On the other hand, it questions the recruitment practices – and the shift from the reliance on the walk-in to the online application – for labour market functioning and exclusion.

It is impossible to measure the degree to which recruitment practices are determined by the specific business constraints of food retail or they are influenced by institutional factors and national employment patterns. However, the literature review and the case studies presented in this paper shed some light. The classic hiring channels used by employers in food retail (walk-in applications, personal contacts and “help wanted” notices) do not differ across the two countries. They are congruent with regard to the key requirements (e.g. to live close to the store and to have a clean appearance and a service-oriented attitude), which require face-to-face interaction to be assessed. It is argued in this paper that these similarities are linked to the specific constraints and characteristics of the sector, which seem to go beyond cross-national contexts. Drawing on the cases of two food retail chains, this paper also notes a change in recruitment practices – from face-to-face to at-a-distance selection – which has a number of implications.

First, there are several contradictions between the at-a-distance process and the critical skills required in this local and service-oriented sub-sector. There is a contradiction between the need to evaluate communication skills – noted both by the literature and by the job advert content – and the implementation of an initial and decisive at-a-distance screening (based on the CV, online tests or phone calls), while the face-to-face interaction is postponed to the end of the process. In the same vein, the place of residence is critical in the food subsector as the store opens at dawn, but it is doubtful that the online filter based on the postal code works better than traditional channels to target the labour force based on the locality. Second, a change in hiring practices enhances differences between the two countries. Indeed, based on the “Internet only” scheme and online tests, the process implemented in the UK company is more selective than the French one. Such a contrast may be linked to specific national institutions and rules, as the reliance on formal channels and HR devices is more prevalent in the UK than in France. However, the characteristics of the jobs also have a part to play. Nearly all of the vacancies advertised by the UK company are part-time jobs, whereas six out of ten jobs advertised are full-time in the French case. Exclusive web-based selection in the UK may be linked to a strategy to recruit more (short) and substitutable part-timers. In other words, recruitment practices are underpinned by the characteristics of the vacancies, and they influence at the same time the characteristics of the vacancies. In addition, online applications and tests may reduce hiring costs, which are increasing with the number of part-timers hired.

If explanations based on institutional factors and labour market patterns are relevant, other retail firms would adopt the online test and selection in the UK, not in

France, however. Additional case-study investigations will be needed to evaluate whether the new processes implemented in the two companies are isolated cases or whether they reflect growing practices in their respective country.

The second finding of the research addresses the influence of recruitment practices on labour markets and, more accurately, on the ability job seekers have to pursue certain opportunities. Compared to other sub-sectors, the emphasis on aesthetic criteria and product knowledge to fill vacancies in food retail is less pronounced. As a result, exclusion of job seekers deemed to be disadvantaged may be less pronounced than in other sub-sectors. Traditional channels used in food retail require a job seeker to be able to conduct a job search on his own, and there is a relevant risk that unfair judgement occurs at a very early stage during an informal meeting. However, these processes provide job seekers to enhance their qualities and to submit their résumé at the right time and to the right person. To a certain extent, they reduce the competition. By implementing formal devices and procedures and by decreasing the weight of “feeling” and “first impression”, the at-a-distance selection performed by HR staff reduces unfair and discriminatory judgement. Nevertheless, the discussion becomes virtually irrelevant; there are fewer job search channels available; the at-a-distance process prioritises signals such as experience and student status and often requires computer literacy. The disadvantaged job seekers who do not have the correct signals for being selected on the basis of their résumé must compete directly with other applicants.

The emphasis on aesthetic criteria in fashion retail may be viewed as a way to target students. By prioritising at-a-distance signals and computer literacy, the at-a-distance recruitment scheme may also be interpreted as a way to target students and a younger workforce in supermarkets and superstores. The literature suggests that employment policies must act to reduce labour market inequalities by improving training programs that include soft skills for unemployed people who tend to self-select (Cullen, 2011) and by encouraging assessment based on technical skills (Lindsay and Sturgeon, 2003; Nickson *et al.*, 2012; Rieucan and Salognon, 2014). The findings presented here suggest that there is a need for employment policies to encourage retail food employers to maintain a diversity of local hiring channels and not to indiscriminately embrace the web-based scheme. An “Internet-only” recruitment process is not adapted to evaluate the key requirements in retail food, and there is a relevant risk that it exacerbates inequalities in low-wage labour markets.

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