

Chapter 4

Displacing Workers Between Companies



I think that if you want to pursue a good career it is important to be in the right spot, to have the right connections with the right people around you, which is something hard to find. So if you focus a little bit too much on the location you actually miss great opportunities. So that is my belief that mobility is essential nowadays.

German human resources manager working for a multinational company in Basel, personal communication, 29 September 2015.

This chapter focuses on the way private sector actors manage mobility and define “highly skilled migrants”. I focus on recruitment and relocation processes, as well as on the role of certain intermediaries in flexibly allocating workers to projects. The definition of skills in this context involves more than just qualifications and knowledge. Considerations of a person’s behaviour and background during evaluation processes lead to subtle forms of selection that involve not only what a person can do, but also how their characteristics are socially constructed, as well as the specific environment in which the evaluation takes place.

I develop this argument by analysing strategies that companies use to access skilled workers. In this case, intermediaries such as professional recruiters, headhunters, or relocation agents may help employers select, attract, and retain appropriate candidates. Another strategy involves outsourcing these tasks to an agency that will allocate short-term workers to projects according to immediate needs. This involves a different type of mobility, since the workers move from project to project instead of relocating on a long-term basis. I illustrate this last point with the example of a management consulting firm, which sells “experts” to clients via an extremely flexible mobility management infrastructure.

These cases complement the first part of this book by showing how, beyond policies and state-related practices, private sector actors play a central role in structuring certain forms of mobility and defining their conditions. Furthermore, by critically

discussing the notions of “need” and “highly skilled workers”, I challenge the idea that private sector actors simply obey market rules, and I draw attention to the social dimension of recruitment processes.

Political discussions of “highly skilled migrants” in Switzerland and elsewhere are often connected to ideas of need and shortage. In the case of the Swiss admission processes for non-EU/EFTA workers, for instance, the “highly skilled” are first and foremost constructed as those who can solve labour shortages by occupying crucial positions that nobody else can occupy. In this context, “highly skilled migrants” are defined not only based on their skills but based on their ability to meet a demand thanks to the rarity of their skills. In Switzerland, issues of need and shortage were particularly debated after the adoption of the initiative against mass migration in February 2014, when several political and economic actors grew concerned about the difficulties that new restrictions on immigration would create in some sectors (Swiss Radio and Television, 2015; Wurz, 2016). In this context, quantifying the national need for highly skilled workers and determining the extent to which the domestic workforce could meet this need became crucial.

However, the notion of “need”, like that of “highly skilled migrant”, is not straightforward (Findlay, McCollum, Shubin, Apsite, & Krisjane, 2013). From a logical perspective, the very idea of a measurable need for highly skilled migrants is problematic: if human capital generates productivity, job creation, and economic growth, as many authors argue (Bodvarsson & Van den Berg, 2009; Constant, 2014; Fairlie & Meyer, 2003; Lucas, 1988; Romer, 1986; Scherer, 1999; Straubhaar, 2002; Zaletel, 2006), then it is reasonable to assume that there will always be a need for highly skilled workers. Indeed, in a dynamic system based on constant economic growth, speaking of a fixed gap that needs to be filled is contradictory, since the gap expands as it fills up. The anthropologist Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan neatly challenges the idea of “need” with the following words:

[T]here is nothing vaguer, more uncertain, more imprecise or more utterly unusable than the notion of “needs”. ... Which reader of these lines is capable of giving a clear answer when caught off-guard, and even after mature reflection, to the question: “What do you need?” And who would refrain from adjusting his answer according to his idea of the kind of “need” the questioner might be willing to satisfy? ... This is an example of the “supply” producing the “demand”. (Olivier de Sardan, 2005, p. 85)

In practice, the need for skilled workers depends on the norms and expectations associated with the activity sector (Ruhs & Anderson, 2010). Indeed, I see several options for addressing a shortage issue based on norms of feasibility, acceptability, and desirability. One option is to train local people with the needed skills, a second is to attract people from abroad who already have these skills, while a third is to reduce the use of qualified staff, either by automating certain tasks, developing less time-consuming practices, or increasing the workload of the staff already present. A fourth option is to lower standards and offer poorer quality services. These options show that demand is produced not only by supply, but also by the standards and regulations of a sector.

This leads me to the question of how the “need” for “highly skilled migrants” is constructed. During interviews with human resources employees and professional

recruiters, I was generally surprised by the quantity of resources that companies were willing to invest in order to attract certain workers described as particularly needed. The manager of a bank's human resources department told me:

Sometimes you hire people who don't have the exact skillset. You know they will need two years to meet the expectations of the position, but at least they are here, you don't have trouble with the relocation, all the costs. But sometimes you need someone immediately, so you say: I can't wait two years. Yes, it's going to cost me 200,000 [Swiss] francs, but okay ...¹ (Personal communication, 11 April 2015)

The quote reveals a dilemma at the core of most recruitment activities: should a firm fill a position with someone who is available but inexperienced – meaning that it would have to invest in training – or should the firm invest in finding a person who already has the right skills? Moreover, what do “skills” mean in this context? Does this refer to what a person can do, or does it also involve who a person is, or how they are perceived? I was surprised to discover that in many cases, finding the “right person” was presented as a better option than investing in professional development.

This example points to an issue directly connected to the topic of “highly skilled migration”: in a country where more than half of recent immigrants have an academic degree and approximately as many university graduates immigrate to Switzerland as are educated in the country (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2016), is there a risk that adequate training of local people will be neglected and replaced by the – much cheaper – importation of workers from abroad (see Leimgruber, 2011, p. 273)?

Chris Wright (2016) raises a similar question when suggesting, in the case of England and Australia, a causal link between the liberalisation of labour market regulations, the relaxation of immigration policies, and a decrease in employers' motivation to invest in training their employees. Indeed, the possibility to import a workforce easily, as well as the weakening of ties between employers and employees – with employers offering more short-term contracts and employees changing employers more often – make attracting experienced workers more advantageous for companies than training employees who may leave the company after a short period (see also Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, Hall, & Hewitson, 2009; Finlay & Coverdill, 2000).

These observations suggest that the norms and practices that structure workers' mobility influence the supply of workers available to employers, which in turn influences employers' norms and practices in terms of labour recruitment and training. Or, maybe it is the other way around: employers' norms and practices of labour recruitment and training influence workers' mobility, which in turn influences the labour supply available to employers. Anyway, it is obvious that hiring processes

¹ The original text reads: “Des fois tu engages des gens qui n'ont pas tout à fait les compétences, tu sais qu'il leur faudra deux ans pour être à la hauteur d'un poste, mais au moins ils sont là, tu n'as pas toutes ces emmerdes de relocation, tu n'as pas tous ces frais. Mais des fois il te faut quelqu'un d'immédiatement opérationnel, donc tu dis: je ne peux pas attendre deux ans. Oui ça va me coûter 200,000 francs mais voilà...” All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

have undergone serious transformations since the end of the twentieth century. I argue that these transformations influence not only recruitment practices but also the norms that define employees' value. Recently, the notion of "talent" has gained central importance in the corporate field. This new focus is connected to the rising popularity of highly skilled migrants in the policy and academic spheres, and these debates influence each other. For instance, the consultancy firm McKinsey & Company coined the expression "war for talent" in 1997 to both describe and trigger transformations in recruitment practices among companies competing at an international level (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001). They argued that attracting and retaining highly talented employees was a strategic business challenge and a key to success. This influential idea constituted a break from the model of career development based on internal promotion.

During my field research, I met and interviewed various actors involved in the process of selecting, attracting, and retaining workers in the context of companies. These included internal employees such as human resources managers, as well as external service providers such as professional recruiters, staffing agents, consultants, and relocation agents. I also interviewed people who had recently moved to Switzerland about their strategies for finding a job. During these encounters, I was surprised that certain aspects of job-seeking which seemed obvious to my interlocutors were doubtful to me. One was the idea that the labour market obeys clear economic rules with an offer and a demand that must match closely in order for people to find jobs. The other, which is connected to the first idea, was that people need to fit the requirements of a position exactly in order to be hired. A third one was the importance given to personality during the hiring process, which in my view contradicted the two other ideas.

In her analysis of the concept of "skill" in education and business in the United States, the anthropologist Bonnie Urciuoli (2008) notes developments in the post-Fordist area of discourses, which present skills as "aspects of worker performance ... that can be acquired and measured and that possess an inherent capacity to bring about desired outcomes, outcomes that can be measured in dollars" (p. 212). Beyond technical knowledge and manual or mechanical operations, she argues that skills are increasingly conceptualised as "technologies of self" (Foucault, 1988), which enable individuals to "rethink and transform one's self to best fit one's job" (Urciuoli, 2008, p. 215). Popularised through public education systems, as well as through business schools, workshops, and other training sponsored by employers, these discourses construct workers as "bundle[s] of skills" (p. 211) who are responsible for acquiring and developing those skills that will give them value in the labour market.

The conceptualisation of skills as acquirable and marketable products that are at the same time part of a worker's personal identity contributes to explaining the contradiction between a mechanistic representation of labour markets and a focus on personality during recruitment processes. According to this perspective, "finding the right person" involves more than merely finding someone with the right knowledge, since attitude, motivation, and other behavioural traits can also be perceived as skills. At the same time, the objectification of skills as measurable products reduces employment to a simple match between offer and demand. This representation is problematic, because

it hides the complexity of the social processes and power relations involved in the construction of labour markets. To give but one example, several researchers have shown the central importance of social capital and networks for accessing jobs (Granovetter, 1983; Lin, 1999; Montgomery, 1992).

Based on these observations, I decided to investigate strategies developed by companies to identify and recruit employees considered most needed. On the one hand, I was often confronted with the idea that “finding the right person” was a central issue of recruitment processes. This encouraged me to ask who the “right people” are in practice. On the other hand, private service providers are directly involved in the process of finding skilled and flexible workers for employers. This convinced me to further explore the role of these intermediaries for selecting, attracting, and retaining workers perceived as valuable to companies. My research question for this section therefore is:

How do private sector actors contribute to structuring the mobility of “highly skilled” individuals and how is the “need” for such individuals constructed?

4.1 International Headhunters and Relocation Agents

I observe that companies invest considerable resources in finding workers for specific positions. To do so, they often resort to intermediaries who help them access the “right person” and quickly get them to work by managing their mobility. In this context, the “right person” is often someone who is immediately available or someone who can be easily dismissed in case they do not fulfil an employer’s expectations.

Few studies exist on commercial intermediaries that connect highly specialised professionals with jobs (Coe, Jones, & Ward, 2010; Groutsis, Van den Broek, & Harvey, 2015; Van den Broek, Harvey, & Groutsis, 2016). However, evidence suggests that such intermediaries are increasingly shaping workers’ mobility (Van den Broek et al., 2016). For instance, Faulconbridge and his co-authors (2009) mention that the number of European offices of the 50 largest international firms specialising in executive search – or headhunting firms – grew from 50 to 871 between 1980 and 2006, with most of this growth taking place after 1990. Moreover, Coe and his co-authors (2010) show an increase of 111% globally and 192% in Switzerland in the number of people working through staffing agencies between 1997 and 2007. According to the American Staffing Association, about 20,000 staffing and recruiting companies currently exist in the US and the total sales of this industry in the country was 150 billion USD in 2016 (American Staffing Association, 2017).

The growing importance of commercial intermediaries specialising in recruiting and managing the mobility of highly specialised workers is due to several factors. First, the increasing focus of service and technological industries on research and development activities led to the emergence of economic sectors largely dependent on knowledge and expertise. This created a new demand for certain types of profes-

sions and skills which did not exist before. It also prompted the emergence of service industries specialising in providing such skills to other businesses (Faulconbridge et al., 2009).

Second, the development of influential service firms contributed to changing attitudes towards recruitment. As shown in the case of executive search services (Beaverstock, Faulconbridge, & Hall, 2010) and management consulting (McKenna, 2006), such industries have invested substantial resources in order to convince corporate clients of the value of employing external experts for various tasks. For instance, Beaverstock and his co-authors (2010) argue that executive search firms have profoundly transformed the way companies recruit their employees by “circulat[ing] the idea that headhunters [are] the way for clients to secure the best candidate for their executive vacancy in a highly competitive global labour market” (p. 831).

Third, the internationalisation of the economy and the increase in firms conducting similar activities created the need for companies to distinguish themselves from competitors (Mach, David, & Bühlmann, 2011). Attracting talented individuals became an intrinsic part of this race for success. On this point, Beaverstock and his co-authors (2010, p. 828) mention an “obsession with expertise” (828), which developed in various sectors of the “knowledge economy” and replaced to a certain extent concerns about certification and formal education. The journalist and writer Malcolm Gladwell (2002) coined the term “talent myth” by asking this question: “Are smart people overrated?” More precisely, he criticised McKinsey & Company’s approach to talent by linking it to Enron’s traumatic bankruptcy in 2001.² According to him:

[The] “talent mind-set” is the new orthodoxy of American management. It is the intellectual justification for why such a high premium is placed on degrees from first-tier business schools, and why the compensation packages for top executives have become so lavish. In the modern corporation, the system is considered only as strong as its stars, and, in the past few years, this message has been preached by consultants and management gurus all over the world. (Gladwell, 2002)

According to Gladwell, the popular idea that smart people are the key to success and that intelligence is a fixed trait that enables the chosen few to outperform competitors encouraged firms like Enron to give enormous freedom, responsibilities, and resources to brilliant young and ambitious employees in order to challenge them and keep them engaged.

This last point indicates an interesting tension. On the one hand, I observe through my interviews a tendency for employers to search for experienced employ-

²Enron was one of the largest US companies, active mainly in the energy sector. Its bankruptcy on 2 December 2001 resulted in a scandal during which it appeared that unprofitable speculative operations in the electricity market had been disguised as profits through fraudulent accounting practices. The service firm Arthur Andersen, which was in charge of auditing Enron’s account while at the same time offering consulting services, was found guilty of destroying documents during the investigation that followed. This scandal subsequently led to Andersen’s bankruptcy and encouraged many service firms to legally separate consulting activities from auditing (see McKenna, 2006).

ees who fit the exact requirements of a position. On the other hand, my ethnographic field research among young consultants – which I will describe in more detail in the next section – hints at a perception of “talent” that corresponds with the “talent mind-set” described by Gladwell. It also reflects to a certain extent the importance that recruiters attribute to a candidate’s personality. These perceptions of “skills”, “talent”, and “need” coexist in the labour market; they influence – and are influenced by – recruitment practices, which include the practices of commercial intermediaries that connect jobs with people.

In this context, commercial intermediaries not only facilitate the recruitment of workers and the mobility of skills, they also contribute to “attracting and mediating migration pathways” (Van den Broek et al., 2016, p. 4). The previous chapter mentioned the role played by lawyers and other admission process specialists in dealing with administrative issues. However, the cases presented only concerned candidates already selected by an employer. To the extent that having an employment contract is now a precondition for permit applications in many OECD countries, it is important to go a step further and observe how candidates get in contact with potential employers in order to obtain a contract. Even in cases where employment is not a precondition for admission, work remains an important driver of mobility. Currently, the majority of immigrants in Switzerland come for work-related reasons (nccr – on the move, 2017b). By informing people about job opportunities, motivating them to move, organising logistical and administrative issues related to their relocation, and facilitating their integration into new social and economic contexts, commercial intermediaries have become key players in professional mobility management issues.

My understanding of mobility in this chapter is not limited to international migration. If oppositions such as “migrant” versus “local” or “citizen” versus “foreigner” were important in the previous chapters to address issues such as admission and integration from the perspective of state authorities, the case of corporate mobility presents particularities that make political borders less relevant for understanding the processes at hand. Contrary to state authorities, mobility management from the perspective of corporate actors aims to reduce the importance of political borders in order to enable fluid exchanges of people, goods, and capital. Nevertheless, in the same way that political borders require extensive resources to be maintained, fluid mobility is a construction that necessitates infrastructure. This section is therefore less concerned with “migration” – understood as the crossing of international borders – and more with “mobility” – understood as a physical and geographical movement associated with meaning and power (Cresswell, 2006). In particular, I am interested in the way the mobility of certain people between, within, and across countries is encouraged and managed in the context of recruiting processes.

In this section, I focus on two types of service provider: professional recruiters (headhunters) and relocation agents. I show that they are more than neutral intermediaries between companies and workers; they are involved at various steps of the relocation process and their roles contribute to shaping mobility experiences. Furthermore, by facilitating the recruitment and displacement of workers, they contribute to shaping an international labour market based on talent attraction and competition.

4.1.1 *Headhunters: Finding the Right Person*

Finding the “right person” to fill an open long-term position is a crucial process for many companies, especially when it comes to jobs with higher degrees of responsibility and specialisation. During my field research, I observed that one of the main issues for many international companies based in Switzerland is not getting people to apply for positions, but rather encouraging applications from people whose skills correspond to employers’ expectations and accurately selecting the person who best fits the position. The difficulty in selecting suitable candidates is often due to the large number of people from all over the world who answer job advertisements, while the difficulty in mobilising adequate candidates often arises from the high degree of internationalisation and specialisation of certain industries, as well as from the low Swiss unemployment rate,³ which creates disconnections between locally available competencies and employers’ requirements. In addition, the possibility for companies based in Switzerland to easily attract workers from abroad – due to generally high salaries and place attractiveness – enables employers to be more selective, which consequently increases the importance of the relationship between a candidate’s skills and their suitability for the position (Acevedo, 2016).

In order to manage the process of attracting and selecting candidates, employers use several strategies. One is to use personal recommendations, in other words, the potential employee’s social capital. For this reason, many companies offer rewards to employees who successfully sponsor a candidate for an open position. Participation in events (e.g. job fairs, information events, networking at tertiary education institutions, professional associations, business meetings) and pre-selection through social media (e.g. LinkedIn, Xing) enable employers to get in touch with and motivate potential employees. Moreover, employing workers on a temporary basis through short-term contracts, internships, or temporary staffing agencies can allow employers to test a candidate before offering them a longer-term contract. Another strategy is to use applicant tracking system (ATS) software that automatically filters applications based on predetermined criteria. This strategy saves time in the case of numerous applications, but the software’s efficiency is limited, and candidates are increasingly aware of which keywords are necessary in order to pass the filtering process. A fifth strategy is to use the services of professional recruiters who will actively identify, motivate, and prepare suitable candidates on behalf of the hiring company. These recruiters can work as freelancers or be employed by large, sector-specialised agencies. Their business involves proposing suitable candidates to companies in exchange for a percentage of the candidate’s yearly salary should they be hired (usually around 15–20%).

A former professional recruiter told me during an interview:

Normally [the employers] receive lot of applications from unemployed people who don’t have any qualifications but who need to apply because of the unemployment insurance. So it’s a lot of work to sort out. Maybe they don’t find the really qualified people, they aren’t

³Around 3%, according to the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (2017).

there, they haven't applied. But if the headhunter asks them, they agree. So usually [the headhunter has] the best ones. For [the employers], it's always interesting to receive someone from the competitors also, because if you have someone from the competitors, you have the knowledge. The competitor has less knowledge, you have more.⁴ (Personal communication, 29 January 2015)

This hints at the reasons why an employer might use the services of a professional recruiter. First, the headhunter can actively search for candidates, rather than waiting for candidates to apply. In this way, they have more chances of finding someone with skills that fit because they will contact people who may not have heard of the open position or thought about applying. In addition, employers often use several headhunters at the same time in order to obtain a selection of interesting candidates, which could save time when choosing among numerous applications. A third aspect is directly related to the "war for talent". Indeed, a key part of headhunting is to convince candidates who are already employed to leave for another company. Headhunters thus partly rely on their ability to "steal" employees from competitors.

All the professional recruiters I met during my field work were highly educated people with limited professional experience in the fields for which they were recruiting. Among my interviewees, one worked as a headhunter while also studying at university and two others had chosen this career because they could not find a job immediately in the field for which they had studied. They told me that their colleagues were in similar situations. An interviewee who worked as a headhunter while studying sociology reflected on the marginal position of some headhunters:

Really, there were some very special people, at the margin of criminality. But there were also normal people. Most of them are normal people with very ethical standards. But there is also ... a lot of cocaine. People for whom it's only about money ...⁵ (Personal communication, 29 January 2015)

These observations suggest that the job of headhunter often constitutes a default option. As Finlay and Coverdill (2000) show, the profession is not particularly valued in terms of social status. Nevertheless, a few professionals capitalise on their networks by offering highly specialised recruiting services and have gained reputation and wealth through their successes, which may inspire beginners. Finally, many headhunting companies offer other services as well (e.g. recruiting, temporary staffing, consulting) and in this way distance themselves from the negative image often associated with headhunters.

⁴"Normalement [les employeurs] reçoivent beaucoup de postulations de chômeurs qui n'ont pas du tout les qualifications mais qui doivent appliquer à cause de l'assurance chômage. Alors c'est beaucoup de boulot de trier. Peut-être ils ne trouvent pas les gens très bon, qualifiés, très en la matière, ils ne sont pas dedans, ils n'ont pas postulé. Mais si le chasseur de têtes leur demande, ils sont d'accord. Alors c'est toi [le chasseur de têtes] qui a les meilleurs normalement. Pour eux c'est toujours intéressant de recevoir quelqu'un de la concurrence aussi, parce que si tu as quelqu'un de la concurrence, tu as le savoir. Le concurrent a moins de savoir, toi tu as plus."

⁵"Il y avait vraiment des personnes très spéciales, à la limite de la criminalité. Mais il y a aussi des gens normaux. La plupart sont des personnes normales avec des standards d'éthique qui sont bien présents. Mais il y a aussi ... beaucoup de cocaïne. Des gens pour qui c'est seulement l'argent..."

My field research was limited to the banking sector, the information and technology sector, the pharmaceutical sector, and the chemical sector. In addition, the interviews mainly addressed the recruitment of people with technical and managerial skills. In this sense, the role of headhunters in my study is limited to certain positions. Yet, I find it interesting that some employers explicitly link the notion of “highly skilled” to the question of availability. According to a human resources manager in a chemical company:

I think that the definition of highly skilled depends basically on the skills that are on the local labour market So you might consider that the skills of a CEO are relatively low if you can easily find somebody like a CEO on your local labour market. (Personal communication, 18 February 2015)

This observation highlights why headhunters are often associated with ideas of competition and talent attraction. From an anthropological perspective, it is interesting to consider the parallel between the contemporary meaning of “headhunter” (as applied to recruitment strategies) and its original meaning (as applied to tribal wars and other forms of conflict). Symbolic similarities between these practices indicate that the choice of word is not meaningless. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss (1984, pp. 141–143), headhunting – like cannibalism – is a way to assimilate the “other” into oneself, which directly connects to definitions of identity and social otherness. In the case of the Amazonian Shuars (more commonly referred to as Jivaro), Anne-Christine Taylor (1985) explains that head reduction practices are a way for one social group to take part of another group’s identity in order to enhance the fertility of their own group. In fact, headhunting practices in many parts of the world derive from the belief that taking the head of an enemy enables an individual or group to steal their soul or vital energy: it weakens the enemy while reinforcing the victor (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013; Poucet, 2007).

In contemporary headhunting practices, “talent” represents both a trophy (the new employee) and the possibility for companies to outperform competitors (or “win the war”). Moreover, the position of headhunters as intermediaries is interesting: as autonomous entities, they protect the companies who hire them from too obviously showing interest in specific employees, or from getting their hands dirty during the hiring process. However, this relationship also involves risks, because a headhunter’s loyalty is limited: they could potentially go to a competitor and use contacts developed through a former client to steal employees. This ambivalent status – which has been analysed in detail by Finlay and Coverdill (2000) – contributes to the headhunters’ dubious reputation.

I will now analyse the role of headhunters in influencing recruitment processes. I argue that as intermediaries, they play a central role in selecting candidates and defining skills. They also contribute to motivating and facilitating mobility. By assisting companies to increase their flexibility and efficiency, they have become key actors in the current international labour market.

Negotiating a Candidate's Value

Actively attracting candidates perceived as particularly valuable has costs. According to the human resources manager of a bank, the profitability of investing in such a process directly depends on the indispensability of the researched skills:

HR manager: There are skills that are suddenly very valued by the market: with skills in IT software development, all of a sudden there's a link to the banking sector. There are only a few developers and we know almost all of them, so suddenly... you look close to you, then in France, then Italy... it's very pragmatic, it follows the market laws.

Interviewer: Do you use [recruitment] agencies?

HR manager: Yes, it's common. But it costs you. They take between 12 and 25% of the annual salary. For a position at 100,000 [Swiss francs] it costs 25,000 francs. So, if you can do it yourself, you do it yourself. But sometimes you don't have the capacity. You look for a guy like this, like that, with such skills, in this or that market. The guy lives in London because that's where things happen. But you can't take a plane to go to London for two weeks, so you send someone.⁶ (Personal communication, 11 April 2015)

This quote shows how a candidate's value is calculated from a firm's perspective. Furthermore, the interviewee suggests that the negotiation of employment conditions depends on the power dynamic between a candidate and an employer:

Interviewer: How do you evaluate whether it's worth the investment?

HR manager: If it's someone who is on the commercial side of things, you know how much he costs, you know how much profit he can make, you can calculate, you can objectivise. It is not always easy to estimate. But if he's a super professional with very specialised skills, the only one in Europe who can do it, he sets his conditions. He sets the market conditions.⁷ (Personal communication, 11 April 2015)

The more the employer needs the candidate, the more the candidate can insist on favourable employment conditions. If power is central to recruitment processes, I would like to emphasise that it cannot be dissociated from the representations each party has about their position in the negotiation. If a candidate is strongly needed by

⁶“Directeur RH: Il y a des compétences qui sont tout d'un coup très valorisées par le marché: des compétences de développement informatique sur tel logiciel, il y a tout d'un coup un référent dans le domaine pour la banque. Alors là, il y a peu de développeurs, on les connaît presque tous, donc tout d'un coup... tu regardes proche de chez toi, puis vers la France, vers l'Italie... Donc c'est très pragmatique, ça obéit aux lois du marché.

Interviewer: Tu passes par des agences?

Directeur RH: Oui, c'est quelque-chose de courant. Mais ça coûte. Ils prennent entre 12 et 25% du salaire annuel. Pour un poste à 100,000, ça coûte 25,000 frs. Alors si tu peux le faire toi-même, tu fais toi-même. Mais des fois tu n'as pas les compétences. Tu cherches un mec comme-ci, comme ça avec telles compétences, dans tel et tel marché. Le type il habite Londres parce que c'est là-bas que ça se passe. Moi je ne peux pas prendre l'avion pour aller pendant deux semaines à Londres, donc j'envoie quelqu'un.”

⁷“Interviewer: Mais comment vas-tu évaluer si ça vaut la peine d'investir tout ça?

Manager RH: Si c'est quelqu'un qui est dans l'approche commerciale des choses, tu sais combien il coûte, tu sais combien il te rapporte, tu peux calculer, tu peux objectiver. Mais ce n'est pas toujours facile d'estimer. Mais si c'est un super prof qui a des compétences hyper pointues, c'est le seul dans toute l'Europe à pouvoir faire le truc, il fixe un peu ses conditions. Il fixe un peu les conditions du marché...”

an employer but is not aware of their perceived value, they might not negotiate the terms of their employment as confidently.⁸ Hence, the power dynamic during the recruitment process can be difficult to assess for each party, and can also be manipulated in different ways.

The intermediation of a professional recruiter may thus, on the one hand, contribute to reinforcing a candidate's confidence in the value of their skills and, on the other hand, encourage the employer to pay more attention to a particular candidate, especially if past experiences with the headhunter have been positive. Simply being chosen by a reputable headhunter may represent a form of symbolic capital that improves both the candidate's self-confidence and their credibility for the employer. Moreover, headhunters have a direct interest in obtaining a good salary for their candidate, since their fee is proportional to this salary. To this end, many recruitment agencies help candidates prepare for job interviews, which can influence their ability to adequately negotiate favourable employment conditions. Finally, professional recruiters can actively contribute to enhancing the legitimacy and value of certain candidates, as shown in this quote from a former headhunter:

It was interesting to receive applications that no one is considering, yet there is something there. And the person can apply everywhere, no one will ever interview him. But I can speak [to the employer], say: I have someone who knows this, who knows that, who does this, he is a little bit like this, like that ... So [the employer] tells me: Good! And we talk. Then I say: but there is a little problem, he is unemployed, his mother had cancer, so for two years he didn't work, he took care of his mother ... and then it goes better.⁹ (Personal communication, 29 January 2015)

Headhunters thus not only identify "talents", they also construct them by coaching candidates and presenting them to employers in an appealing way. Of course, this may not always work, and employers exercise caution when interacting with recruitment agencies. Nevertheless, the fact that more companies are choosing to use external service providers for recruitment increases the role of headhunters as gatekeepers in the perceived "war for talent" (Beaverstock et al., 2010; Faulconbridge et al., 2009; Finlay & Coverdill, 2000). In this sense, the construction of the "right

⁸Evaluating the value of one's specific skills can be very challenging, because this value relies on a rapidly changing market, as well as on companies' specific situations. For instance, Xiang (2007) describes the difficulties that IT training institutes in India have to predict which skills will be in demand in the international labour market in the coming years, and to adapt accordingly. The World Economic Forum also reports that current technological disruptions are rendering many skills obsolete. This makes specialising in "needed" skills not only difficult, but also risky. The report also estimates that by 2020, "more than a third of the desired core skill sets of most occupations will be comprised of skills that are not yet considered crucial to the job today" (World Economic Forum, 2016).

⁹"Alors pour moi c'était intéressant des fois de recevoir des dossiers que personne ne regarde, mais il y a quelque-chose dedans. Et la personne, elle peut postuler partout, elle ne sera jamais vue. Mais moi je peux parler avant, dire: j'ai quelqu'un qui connaît ça, qui sait ça, qui fait ça, il est un peu comme ça, comme ça... Alors ils me disent: ah bien! Et on parle. Puis je dis: mais il y a un petit problème, il est chômeur, sa mère avait le cancer, alors pendant deux années il n'a pas travaillé, il s'est occupé de sa mère... Et après ça va mieux."

person” partly depends on headhunters’ search strategies,¹⁰ as well as on the way they present candidates to employers.

Analysing Personality

In addition to the headhunters’ strategies, I observe that the construction of the “right person” also relies on an evaluation of the candidates’ personal characteristics beyond their qualifications and knowledge. On this point, my research clearly shows that recruitment processes not only evaluate what a person can do but also what kind of person they are. As Urciuoli puts it, this is the moment when “soft skills represent a blurring of lines between self and work” (2008, p. 215).

In interviews, professional recruiters emphasised the importance of a candidate’s personality during the recruitment process, arguing that new employees must be able to fit within a company’s culture. My interviewees did not consider this procedure discriminatory and further rationalised it with utilitarian arguments, as finding the “perfect match” who integrates easily into the company enables all parties – recruiters, candidates, employers – to profit from their investment. According to a professional recruiter:

It could depend on the way of expressing oneself. Sometimes the people were very arrogant you could see in the way they talked that it would not work, depending on the client. We called it the “personal level”. There were also people who did not necessarily totally correspond but who had an interesting personality, which we knew was sought after by a company in particular, so we would propose this person anyway, maybe even before another person with skills that would correspond better.¹¹ (Personal communication, 5 February 2015)

This resonates with Urciuoli’s analysis of the notion of skill, and shows that recruiters look for more than a perfect match exclusively in terms of qualifications and knowledge. In the “skill discourses” that Urciuoli analyses – that is, “discourses that sell skills or skills-related products or that offer workers advice or exhortation about acquiring, assessing, and enhancing their own skills” (2008, p. 212) – any part of a person’s self can be turned into a skill. Candidates are thus encouraged to perceive and express themselves as “bundles of skills”, or combinations of “segmentable, testable, and rankable” products with value on the labour market (Urciuoli (2008, p. 212).

¹⁰Faulconbridge and his co-authors (2009) have analysed in detail the characteristics that professional recruiters use to classify a potential candidate. Beyond skill sets, they highlight the importance of belonging to networks that enable contact with the headhunter (e.g. membership in relevant professional or alumni associations and participation in social events).

¹¹“Ça pouvait tenir à la manière de s’exprimer. Ou des fois les personnes étaient très arrogantes ... Il y avait des personnes, tu voyais dans la façon dont ils répondaient que ça n’allait pas passer, selon le client. On appelait ça le ‘niveau perso’. Il y a aussi des personnes qui ne correspondent pas forcément totalement mais qui ont vraiment une personnalité intéressante qu’on sait qu’une entreprise en particulier recherche. Alors on la propose quand même, peut-être même plus qu’une autre personne qui a des compétences qui correspondraient mieux.”

The problem with these discourses is that they naturalise skills. To the extent that individuals are supposed to be responsible for enhancing themselves, their labour market value becomes a measure of their hard work, motivation, and “natural” talent. The socially inherited dimension of skills – which Pierre Bourdieu called *habitus* (1979) – as well as the socially situated mechanisms that construct their value – the person’s symbolic capital – disappear from the analysis. The power relations and social biases involved in the recruitment process are reframed into an objective evaluation by the recruiter of the products that the candidate can offer.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that social aspects play a central part in the construction of skills. For instance, a candidate’s social and biographical background often works as a selection criterion. Faulconbridge and his co-authors (2009) note that geographical biographies (e.g. having studied and/or worked in specific locations such as the UK, the US, and other hotspots in the global economy) constitute important markers for recruiters to evaluate candidates. The value that recruiters attribute to places thus affects the selection of candidates based on their biographies, including their social and cultural origins.

I noticed significant variations in how value is assigned to different places. Although my observations chiefly concern multinational companies that recruit at an international level, the Swiss labour market also comprises many companies which are active locally. This creates different requirements in terms of the characteristics sought by employers. According to an interviewee who worked as a professional recruiter both in Switzerland and Germany:

I worked in Switzerland, not only with candidates, but also with companies, and I really had the experience: so you ask the company ... who they are searching for. And it’s ok that they tell us: ok, listen, we are looking for someone with skills in Java developing; we are a very young company, so we are looking for someone who is also young, I mean between 20 and 35 ... That’s ok. But then they really tell you: if he doesn’t speak Swiss German of the area of Bern, we wouldn’t accept him. That’s ridiculous and that’s something I can’t understand until today. ... It’s not everywhere the same. I mean, in Basel they are more open-minded. They are used to it in [big pharmaceutical companies] to work with ... they are looking for English-speaking people, really fluent in English, more than I am, really like their mother tongue. So that was not the real problem in Basel. But if you go outside of Basel or Geneva, in central Switzerland, that was really ... not what I would call open-minded. (Personal communication, 13 December 2012)

This suggests preferences for distinct forms of capital (*capital d’autochtonie*¹² versus international capital¹³) that automatically exclude certain people from certain jobs based on their biography: for example, someone who did not grow up in Bern has almost no chance of speaking the dialect of this region, while someone who has

¹²This term was first used by the sociologists Michel Bozon and Jean-Claude Chamboredon (1980) to describe “all the resources that belonging in localised relationship networks provides” (Renahy, 2010, p. 9).

¹³I refer here to the article by Anne-Catherine Wagner and Bertrand Reau (2015) on the notion of international capital.

never lived in an anglophone environment has little chance of developing proficiency in English. In each case, these preferences rely on socially loaded values that can create both inclusion and exclusion, depending on the interaction between an employer's expectations and a candidate's personal background.

I also observed that nationality plays an important role. On the one hand, headhunters usually focus on "international people" because their role is to facilitate access to candidates with specific profiles and it is important to be able to search as broadly as possible. Moreover, the professional recruiters I interviewed all agreed that it is easier to find interesting candidates outside Switzerland, in particular because proposing a (relatively high) Swiss salary is a motivating factor in itself. On the other hand, the importance accorded to nation-based admission rules for the selection of candidates differed between interviewees. While some professional recruiters told me that obtaining work permits for non-EU and non-EFTA nationals was not an issue as long as they focused on very specialised and highly qualified people, another recruiter said:

After a while, I stopped looking outside of Europe. ... We always looked at nationality. ... If there was a country outside of Europe where we searched more, it was the United States. But it's true that it was complicated. Then, if it was the right person, it was possible. But it really had to be the perfect profile.¹⁴ (Personal communication, 5 February 2015)

This points to the influence of the national admission system, which discriminates between EU/EFTA and non-EU/EFTA nationals, but it also highlights a preference for US nationals that is not connected to admission rules, since the US belongs in the non-EU/EFTA category. The analysis of survey data in the next chapter will show that this preference for US candidates is not an isolated case. In fact, among non-EU/EFTA countries, the US represents the main highly qualified workforce provider to Switzerland (nccr – on the move, 2017a). The survey data also reveal a tendency among employers to actively support US employees' relocation to Switzerland by offering services such as financing moving costs, assisting with administrative issues, or helping to find accommodation.

Although this phenomenon could partially be explained by the fact that employers need fluent English speakers, I argue that it also reflects global dynamics of power that construct preferences for certain people based on social origin and trajectory. Beyond qualifications, recruiters use many other markers to evaluate a person's suitability for a given position. To illustrate this point with an example, the partner of one of my interviewees was refused a job because he was apparently too "exotic" and thus "wouldn't fit in", being Jewish, homosexual, and non-European (personal communication, 13 December 2015). In addition, I observed that companies that brand their diversity by emphasising the impressive range of nationalities that they employ can in fact be very homogeneous in terms of the employees'

¹⁴"Au bout d'un moment, j'ai arrêté de chercher en-dehors de l'Europe. ... On regardait toujours la nationalité. ... S'il y avait un pays en-dehors de l'Europe où on cherchait plus, c'était les Etats-Unis. Mais c'est vrai que c'était compliqué. Après, si c'était la bonne personne, c'était possible. Mais il fallait vraiment que ce soit le profil parfait."

socioeconomic backgrounds and education. In this sense, a recruiter's evaluation of a candidate's personality is far from objective, since it uses markers such as social origin, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, and so forth to define a person's ability to fit into a certain position.

Findlay and his co-authors (2013) nicely complement these findings by showing how recruitment agencies use body language and national stereotypes to identify "ideal migrant workers" for different professions. Although their research focuses on the recruitment of less skilled workers from Latvia to the UK, the dynamics they highlight reflect my own analysis in many ways. In particular, they argue that recruiters have to identify not only appropriate skills but also "motivated" workers. To do so, both candidates and recruiters engage in a mutually conditioning process, where they tend to reproduce stereotypes associated not only with the profession involved, but also with social categories such as nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, age, and class. In this way, they "reinforce dominant understandings of the attributes that constitute the good worker" (Findlay et al., 2013, p. 163).

To summarise, the value of candidates is connected to various factors that go beyond pure economic calculations. In this process, professional recruiters can play a central role by preselecting candidates according to the employer's perceived expectations, coaching them during the recruitment process, and presenting them to employers in a positive light. The intermediary position of headhunters also enables companies to inconspicuously poach employees from competitors, which contributes to enhancing the value of both headhunters and candidates. Finally, the evaluation of candidates not only relies on their qualifications, but also on their personal attributes and social competences. As with state-related admission processes, we see that the definition of a "good" candidate depends on the context in which this person is selected, presented, and evaluated.

4.1.2 Relocation Agents: Motivating People to Move

Besides using the services of professional recruiters to fill specific positions, the idea of a "war for talent" has encouraged many companies to develop strategies to promote their public image and become more attractive for workers (Berthon, Ewing, & Li, 2005; Harari, 1998).¹⁵ In addition to investing in marketing and communication, many companies offer their employees special services in order to distinguish themselves from competitors. In this context, employment and relocation packages play an important role in motivating certain candidates to join a company (Ravasi, Salamin, & Davoine, 2015; Salamin & Davoine, 2015; Tissot, 2015, 2016). According to one headhunter interviewed:

¹⁵ Reflecting this trend, rankings such as the "World's Most Attractive Employer" classify companies according to potential candidates' perceptions of their desirability as an employer (Barck, 2017; Harvey, Groutsis, & Van den Broek, 2017).

Headhunter: Often, for the highly qualified, it's not only the salary that counts, it's the package, it's other things ...

Interviewer: Like the bonus?

Headhunter: No, not only the bonus. The bonus too, but the fringe benefits.

Interviewer: So, the compensation?

Headhunter: The insurance, the cars, the computers, all this. There are many firms that invest a lot in employees because they need motivated people, highly qualified people, so they try to offer a very attractive environment. So, it's also the working hours, the train pass, the possibility of day care. That's also a problem for those who come from abroad: to find a job for the wife.¹⁶ (Personal communication, 29 January 2015)

Offering special services to employees relocating to Switzerland became a trend in the 1990s. For instance, a woman who arrived in Basel as a trailing spouse during that time period found that almost no organised support existed for people moving to the region for work-related reasons. To address this problem, she founded a relocation services company to help newcomers find accommodation, and was quickly contacted by one of the region's pharmaceutical companies which was developing relocation services for employees and their families as part of a large restructuring project. She now works for several companies and has expanded her business to include a broad range of services: she may, among other things, call the future employees before their move to inform them about living conditions in Switzerland, organise a reconnoitring trip for them and their family prior to their relocation, find a school for their children, obtain the various authorisations that they need to live and work in Switzerland, manage their insurance, inform them about tax-related issues, and find accommodation for them.

Today, many agencies in Basel and elsewhere provide these kinds of services. They are made available to newcomers by the companies that hire large numbers of specialised workers from abroad, creating in this way a demand for such services. A survey conducted in the French-speaking part of Switzerland (Ravasi et al., 2015) revealed that the most common relocation services offered by multinational companies to their employees include support for moving costs, finding accommodation, administrative and tax issues, language courses, and insurance (in more than 70% of cases). Other common services include language courses for a trailing spouse, finding a school for their children, housing and education subsidies, and organising an exploratory trip to Switzerland prior to relocation (in more than 50% of cases). While some of these services are offered directly by the employing company, other are provided through intermediaries at external agencies.

¹⁶“Chasseur de têtes: Souvent, pour les hautement qualifiés, ce n'est pas seulement le salaire qui compte, c'est le paquet, c'est d'autres trucs...

Moi: Le bonus ?

Chasseur de têtes: Non, pas seulement le bonus. Le bonus aussi, mais les fringe benefits.

Moi: Donc les compensations ?

Chasseur de têtes: Les assurances, les voitures, les ordinateurs, tout ça, il y a beaucoup de boites qui investissent beaucoup pour les employés, parce qu'ils sont tellement besoin de gens qui sont motivés, qui sont bien qualifiés, alors ils cherchent à offrir un environnement qui est très attractif pour eux. C'est aussi les heures de travail, c'est l'abonnement général, c'est la possibilité d'une crèche. Ça aussi c'est un problème, si quelqu'un vient d'ailleurs: trouver un boulot pour la femme.”

Relocation packages may thus involve different stages of the relocation process. Before the relocation, the promise of a generous package, as well as positive information about the new environment, may help convince a promising candidate to accept a new position. During the relocation, support for moving costs and administrative issues may help alleviate some of the constraints associated with mobility. After the relocation, services such as spouse employment support and payment of language courses may facilitate adaptation to the new environment. These different services enable employers to construct mobility as a smooth process in order to attract and keep the employees they want most.

All the relocation agents I met were women who had experienced various relocations themselves and had decided to use this experience to create their own relocation companies after settling in Switzerland. They combined this job with other activities such as coaching, training, and voluntary engagement with the “expat” community. Hence, their professional activities included various tasks connected with their personal experiences and networks. They emphasised the flexible nature of their work, which they constantly adapt according to their clients’ demands. However, one mentioned the differences between her activities and the more standardised services of relocation agencies that operate internationally (e.g. Cartus and Crown Relocations). She explained that these agencies represent unfair competition for smaller, local agencies like hers, whose business relies on local knowledge and tailor-made services. She observed a tendency for companies to increasingly collaborate with larger agencies, which is destroying her business. In this process, smaller relocation agencies become subcontractors of larger ones in order to organise the tasks that require specific knowledge of the local environment. However, the rates paid by these agencies are less profitable than if the employing company had contracted the local agency directly. These observations are confirmed by broader studies that stress the current tendency among multinational companies to reduce investments in relocation packages (Cartus, 2014; Davoine & Salamin, 2012).

While all the headhunters I interviewed were men, I observed that the relocation sector was female-dominated – at least in the cases of the small relocation agencies. This gendered dimension can be partly explained by the fact that the work of many relocation agents corresponds to roles traditionally attributed to women, such as the management of affairs related to housing and children. The survey data in the next chapter will show that, in the majority of cases, relocating employees are men while the following spouses are women, which means that relocation agents mainly deal with women in their daily practice. Moreover, my interviewees explained that they founded their companies after abandoning a previous career to follow their partner, or because they wanted the flexibility to manage their time according to their family duties. All these elements show that both the recruitment and relocation industries are structured in alignment with gendered norms and expectations that reproduce a division of roles between men and women.

Constructing Smooth Relocations and Status

When I asked a relocation specialist why companies mandate her services, she answered:

I think for them [the employers] it's really making the transition as smooth as possible for the employee so that it doesn't fall back on his work ... they just want efficiency and quick settling in. (Personal communication, 2 December 2015)

However, the role of relocation agents not only concerns organising the moves of employees, but also motivating and psychologically preparing them on behalf of the employer prior to the relocation:

Part of our job has always been to speak to people before they sign the contract, show them what it could be like to live in Basel for them and spouse or partner and family and let them decide based on real facts and reality of seeing the place and potential ways they could live, and potential places and schools and parks and fitness-centres and let them decide if they want to move here or not, based on the offer of the company. (Personal communication, 18 November 2015)

Another important aspect relates to the idea of status, which derives from the value that employers attribute to their employees, as well as from the power dynamic between them. The anthropologist Shabih Zaidi, who conducted research on the international employees of a multinational company based in Basel, observed that workers who relocated from abroad often discussed and compared the different services that they had received as part of their employment packages (personal communication, 25 November 2015). These packages not only alleviate some of the stress associated with moving, but are also an indication of the value that an employee brings to the company. In the same vein, a human resources manager told me:

If you want to be professional, you have to mandate an agency. But agencies are expensive! And then you give them the feeling to be expats, and in the head of expats it's: I want an expat contract and the school for the children, the private school. Three children cost 100,000 francs per year. So, if he has a rare skill, he wants 100,000 for the school, he wants the accommodation ... it's a bit deterring for the employer. (Personal communication, 11 April 2015)

Access to relocation services and other compensation or benefits is central to understanding the power relations that exist between employees within a company. Notwithstanding the fact that, from the hiring companies' perspective, relocation services primarily serve the purpose of attracting employees by facilitating their move, only employees in the highest positions and with the most needed skills receive such support, even though performance and flexibility requirements increasingly affect all levels of the corporate hierarchy (Della Porta, Hänninen, Silvasti, & Siisiäinen, 2015; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). In this sense, access to relocation services can give an indication of the perceived value of an employee within a company and thus contributes to social distinction processes among employees.

Retaining Valuable Employees by Taking Care of Their Families

Employers sometimes use relocation agents to retain valuable employees by making sure that their whole family adapts well to their new environment (Ravasi et al., 2015). Support for accompanying family members may be part of a relocation package, for instance to help them find a job or introduce them to local social networks (Salamin & Davoine, 2015). As mentioned in the previous section, the goal of such programmes is to prevent employees from suddenly leaving the company because their family is not satisfied with their new way of life. In this way, private matters become both a corporate concern and an economic issue.

I interviewed a woman with medical training who had resigned from her job to follow her husband to his new position in the pharmaceutical sector in Basel. As she explained to me:

So, I had two persons who were responsible for me. And they were trying to help me and to give me information about groups in the city: what can I do as a non-working person, where can I find other expats, women who don't work ...? So, I didn't know what to do the whole day. I was used to working, so this person was giving me a lot of information about groups. She was taking me to reunions. (Personal communication, 15 April 2016)

Her husband's employer had mandated a relocation agency to support the family with various practical aspects: finding an apartment, organising residence permits, and introducing them to the local social networks. The interviewee added:

My husband started to work immediately and so I stayed: so now what? So, I had like an activity, going and meeting someone, talking to someone who connected me with others.

This shows that the role of relocation agencies goes beyond purely logistical aspects: employers also take emotional issues into account as part of an economic strategy to retain valuable employees. This dimension appears even more clearly in the example of a person working for a relocation agency who set up a "post-hiring programme" for an American company based in Zug: her role consists of organising coffee meetings for the employees' spouses and seeing to their needs. In this way, she can identify potential problems and try to solve them. During one of these meetings, for instance, she noticed a person who seemed to be suffering from depression and convinced her to see a doctor. She also supported another person who wanted to start a psychology practice. In her own words:

If that lady didn't have that space to come and talk to me, she would probably have carried on until she'd be so frustrated, she'd have said to her husband: I'm going back. See? So we can intervene quite early if we notice something is not well with the spouses. ... It's like picking out the ones that aren't doing well and kind of helping them. (Personal communication, 2 December 2015)

Like headhunters, relocation agents create differentiated possibilities for workers to move and settle in new places: while headhunters produce candidates and try to influence the value that employers attribute to them, relocation agents produce "expats" with access to special forms of support before, during, and after their move. Hence, they not only contribute to making the relocation of some employees easier, but also create incentives to move to and stay in certain locations. By actively

managing the mobility of workers and their companions, they play a central part in the corporate “war for talent”.

4.1.3 Portrait: The Job Search Experiences of a Colombian Couple

To conclude this section, I would like to analyse the story of a Colombian couple currently living in Switzerland. It illustrates the case of a trailing spouse who received extensive support from his wife’s employer – a company known for investing significant resources in its employees – to find a job locally. This story is unusual, as our survey data shows that only 7.5% of men relocated to Switzerland to accompany family, compared to 30% of women. Moreover, the support that this male trailing spouse received during his period of unemployment is exceptional in many regards.

This case is interesting precisely because it is unusual. First of all, it shows that some people are given access to extensive resources in terms of relocation services, and accordingly it constitutes a good point of comparison with the stories presented thus far. At the same time, it illustrates that even the best relocation support is sometimes not sufficient to achieve one’s objectives, which calls into question the idea that this person is necessarily privileged. Finally, the gender dimension of the case is interesting, because it adds to the complexity of this situation and helps denaturalise gender hierarchies and stereotypes.

I first met José at an event organised by the association at the chamber of commerce in Vaud that offers free services to new employees of international companies and their families. Originally from Colombia, José had recently relocated to Switzerland from the US to follow his wife, who worked for a major multinational company. He was unemployed and actively looking for a job. I wanted to understand how relocated individuals deal with unemployment, and thus contacted him to ask for an interview. He invited me to his apartment and his wife Susana joined us to talk about their experiences.

José and Susana grew up in Colombia in upper-middle-class families. José’s father worked as an economist and his mother as an executive assistant, whereas both of Susana’s parents were civil engineers. They both received a high-level of education at international schools in Colombia, then completed their undergraduate degrees at the same private university in Bogota, which is where their relationship began. They first experienced living abroad in their early twenties: Susana spent a year studying in London, whereas José received a government-funded scholarship from the US and subsequently moved there to study economics. He then returned to Colombia to work in a local bank. During this time, Susana was employed by a major multinational company in Colombia. Her job involved short-term assignments abroad, which enabled her to develop an international network. She then moved to the US to complete a master’s degree in engineering. José decided at this

point to resign from his job at the bank and to accompany her to the US. There he started an MBA in finance while working as a graduate assistant. They both stayed in the US after graduation and found jobs easily. However, after a year, they had to transform their working visas into more stable work authorisations. They subsequently applied for the H1B lottery system¹⁷ and Susana obtained a permit. However, José's authorisation was denied and he was thus unable to work in the US.

José did not want to stay in the US without the right to work, so they decided to leave the country. Their first plan was to go back to Colombia, but a former colleague of Susana's informed her that the multinational company for which she had worked in Colombia was offering a position in Switzerland. Susana already knew the team because she had collaborated with them as part of a temporary assignment in Switzerland 5 years before. She thus applied and was given the job.

Before deciding whether to accept the new position, the couple researched the possibilities for José to obtain work in Switzerland. This point was crucial for them, since José wanted to stay economically active. The human resources department at Susana's future employer confirmed that José could obtain a work permit for accompanying family members that would not involve any of the limitations usually imposed on non-EU and non-EFTA nationals. The company also connected them with a relocation agency and a list of consultants that specialise in employment issues. José organised several Skype meetings with these consultants to obtain more information about the Swiss labour market. Reassured by these exchanges, he expected to find a suitable job within 6 months in Switzerland and was thus motivated to move.

After signing her employment contract, Susana waited a few months before receiving confirmation that the residence permit and work authorisations for Switzerland had been approved. She did not get involved in the administrative process since her future employer organised everything. As soon as this aspect was solved, Susana and José moved to Switzerland. The firm supported them in many ways: they financed the whole process; they arranged for a furnished apartment during the first 3 months following their arrival; they paid for a rental car during the 1st month; and they offered 40 h of language classes. In addition, José benefitted from a special package for new employees' accompanying spouses: he was invited to participate in weekly events at the company where he met other accompanying spouses and received information on topics related to job search, personal development, and issues of daily life in Switzerland. The company also offered him several thousand Swiss francs that he could use for any activity that would help him improve his chances of finding a job in Switzerland. José decided to invest this money in leadership classes at a business school, as well as in a personal coach who helped him apply for jobs.

Despite the various forms of support, it took José almost a year to find a job in Switzerland. He explains his difficulties by the fact that he arrived at a time when

¹⁷H1B visas are work authorisations for highly qualified foreign workers in the US. The lottery system consists of a randomised selection process through which part of these authorisations are allotted.

firms were scarcely recruiting in the financial sector. Moreover, his position as an outsider restricted the range of positions for which he could apply to companies that valued his international capital. The competition for such jobs was also fierce: he observed through his LinkedIn Premium account that he often had more than a hundred competitors from all over the world for a single position. In addition, José noted the importance of personal contacts for getting a job in his field. Hence, he actively tried to increase his network: he became more active on professional social media and regularly posted online articles related to his professional areas of interest. He sent his profile to various staffing agencies and participated in all kinds of social events in order to meet as many people as possible. He experienced these activities as a way not only to increase his chances of employment but also to keep himself busy and motivated. He said:

Meeting people ... that's very important because you start feeling like it's your problem. ... But then when you are in this kind of meetings, you see people equally educated or more educated: PhDs with twelve years of experience ... and they don't find a job. So, I start saying ...: it's not you, it's the market. It's true. We don't find jobs, because there are no jobs available for us. (Personal communication, 17 April 2016)

Being unemployed was difficult for José, but he managed to keep his spirits up by regularly attending the meetings organised by Susana's employers and other get-togethers at the business school where he took leadership classes. He also met people through the language school financed by Susana's employer, the events at the chamber of commerce in Vaud, and the activities offered by several "expat" organisations in the region. These activities enabled him to meet other highly educated yet unemployed foreigners, as well as active professionals who could share tips and tricks.

Susana actively supported him by regularly accompanying him to these meetings and by researching useful information. She considered it part of her responsibility as his wife to help José through this process:

For me it was also very important that even though [José] was going through this very difficult time, especially towards the end of last year ... we had to keep the energy up. ... So that was also part of the juggling process last year. ... Because I had to, I want to do a good job and I want to still grow in the company and all that, while at the same time I was taking care of my family. (Personal communication, 17 April 2016)

She informed her colleagues and acquaintances that her husband was looking for employment in order to widen their job-seeking network. The couple also regularly invited people to their home so that José could practise speaking the local language. According to him: "Last year has been one of the busiest years I've had, socially speaking."

One day, José saw an opening on LinkedIn for a position corresponding to his profile at Susana's firm. He immediately applied and asked Susana to recommend him to the manager. This strategy worked: José was invited for a job interview and was subsequently hired. At the time of my interview with them, Susana and José were both working for the same company and Susana was pregnant. When asked about their plans, José said:

We're going to wait a couple of years and see what happens. But so far, as long as we can have a job that we enjoy, a community that supports us, friends that you can be with and enough money to bring your parents from time to time to go on vacation, there's no reason to move. I mean Switzerland is a wonderful place to be. It's no doubt. That's a reason why a lot of people move here. ... We're in a country with multinationals that if you are good and give hundred percent, hundred and ten percent and you work hard and you study and you understand things, you can keep moving with your career. (Personal communication, 17 April 2016)

* * *

This story illustrates a situation in which two people with very similar backgrounds ended up in distinct situations after moving to Switzerland: while Susana migrated as a highly skilled professional recruited by a major multinational company, José arrived as an unemployed foreigner whose presence was legally tolerated only because of his wife's position. At the same time, the example shows that Susana's employer made efforts to ensure José's quick social and professional integration. Moreover, the couple could rely on numerous other resources to ease their transition and develop a local network. Nevertheless, both partners experienced José's period of unemployment as difficult.

In many regards, José's and Susana's relocation went smoothly. The fact that Susana moved to Switzerland for professional reasons greatly facilitated their transition through the active support of her employer. Their past experiences also contributed to easing their move. For instance, since they are both fluent in English they did not encounter any serious communication difficulties upon arrival. They also did not experience any difficulties having their US diplomas recognised. Finally, having lived abroad before, they knew to a certain extent how to adapt to a new place. For Susana, the transition was even easier: since she had worked for the company before, she was able to quickly integrate into her colleagues' team. All these elements constitute "international capital" which influenced their social positions and experiences after the relocation (Wagner & Reau, 2015).

Nevertheless, José and Susana's privileged position was offset by certain constraints that limited their range of possibilities. One of the main reasons they came to Switzerland was that José could not obtain a work permit in the US. As it was not conceivable for him to stay in the US without a job, they looked for opportunities elsewhere. The fact that Switzerland enables accompanying family members to work without further limitations played a central role in their decision to move. From a political perspective, the relatively generous family reunification policy for non-EU and non-EFTA workers in Switzerland is one of the few tools that aim to make the restrictive Swiss admission system more attractive for "wanted immigrants". We thus see that admission policies in both countries directly influenced this couple's choices.

It is also interesting to note that José was excluded from the US labour market but accepted as an accompanying family member in Switzerland. In contrast, Susana was admitted as a qualified worker in both systems. While pure luck was involved in the case of the US visa lottery system, Susana's international professional

experience and network made the difference in the second case. Despite very similar backgrounds, Susana's experience working for a multinational company and José's experience working at a local bank led to different outcomes. Although José's position was prestigious at a national level, it did not enable him to develop the same kind of international network as Susana did. Furthermore, José's contacts and experience in the US became professionally useless after he was refused the legal authorisation to work in the country. The fact that Susana's colleague suggested the job in Switzerland just at the right moment can be considered luck, yet also highlights the value of her international capital. Her previous work experience and professional network in the country made her the perfect candidate. In contrast, José knew nobody in Switzerland, and his outsider position further limited his professional opportunities, which made finding a job more difficult.

This case nicely illustrates how individuals can overcome disadvantages associated with certain aspects of their social positions thanks to other resources. In particular, I would like to emphasise the important roles played by the support of various institutional actors.

First, without the sponsorship of Susana's employer, the couple would have had almost no chance of obtaining work permits in Switzerland because of their Colombian nationality. The fact that Susana's employer is a big multinational with significant economic power and experience in procedures for hiring non-EU/EFTA nationals explains why the administrative process went so smoothly. Hence, Susana's employer was an essential element for enabling their move to Switzerland despite their status as non-EU/EFTA nationals.

Second, the various services offered by Susana's employer reduced many of the challenges usually associated with mobility and contributed to constructing their relocation as a smooth and easy process. Moreover, José and Susana had the opportunity to participate in several events targeted at qualified, economically secure, and internationally connected people. In this way, they easily developed a network of relationships within a social group of international people with whom they identified. The presence of organisations aimed at people with similar socioeconomic backgrounds in the region thus enabled them to quickly expand their connections and obtain access to local information and resources.

Finally, José's position as Susana's husband was crucial for shaping the institutional support that he received. In this context, it is interesting to develop the gendered dimension of this situation further. Even though José followed Susana to Switzerland, he played a decisive role in the migration decision, since Susana resigned from her job in the US because José was unable to work there and wanted to remain professionally active. In addition, Susana made it clear to her employer that José's ability to work was a condition for her acceptance of the position in Switzerland. This explains why the relocation support provided by Susana's employer focused so much on labour market access. In other interviews with women trailing spouses, I observed that relocation agents tended to prioritise social aspects over professional ones, for instance by introducing them to clubs and activities that mainly attract non-working women. For José, however, remaining without a job was never an option. His social position as a man and husband within a patriarchal

environment, together with Susana's position with regard to her new employer and her willingness to promote José's professional interests, thus contributed to framing his labour market integration as a crucial issue.

In the end, Susana's support made the difference, since José obtained his position through her network. However, the relocation support they received from various agents and institutions framed the positive experiences they now associate with their life in Switzerland by giving them access to numerous self-development and networking opportunities and increasing their sense of belonging in their new environment.

In conclusion, this case illustrates the important role played by employers and other professional services in attracting people to Switzerland and shaping the conditions of their stay. Beyond state-related policies and practices, private sector institutions are central to the process of attracting, selecting, and retaining immigrants. They act as gatekeepers and co-constructors of employees' value, and influence the experiences and choices of relocating individuals. As the example showed, the ways these intermediaries select individuals and the support they provide rely on contextual elements and social norms that interact with the characteristics and biography of the candidates involved. In this process, two individuals with similar backgrounds and profiles can end up in very different positions. For this reason, it is important to adopt a dynamic understanding of the construction of social categories.

4.2 Allocating Experts to Projects: The Case of Management Consultants

In my interviews, human resources specialists argued that finding the "right person" to fill an open position and (in some cases) supporting their relocation is expensive and represents a risk: if an employee is not as efficient as expected or decides to leave unexpectedly, the resources invested might be lost and the whole process might have to start again. In a context where needed skills change rapidly and where flexibility is seen as a key to efficiency, companies that aim to remain competitive might not always consider hiring people on a long-term basis to be the best strategy. Instead, they might opt for short-term contracts and outsource the costs of selecting, hiring, and moving.

Temporary staffing agencies and consulting agencies both offer this kind of solution. One of the main characteristics of these labour market intermediaries is their triangular relationship with clients: the agency sells the work of temporary employees to client companies, and is therefore responsible for the employment contract with the worker (Coe et al., 2010). For client companies, this has the advantage of enabling quick reactions if a worker with specific skills is needed on short notice, while reducing the costs and risks associated with hiring them directly. Compared to a direct employment relationship, workers employed through an intermediary can more easily be replaced if they do not meet the client firm's expectations, and the

contract between the agency and the client company can more easily be terminated once the client company no longer needs the worker (Coe, Johns, & Ward, 2009; Coe et al., 2010; Findlay et al., 2013; Kalleberg, 2000; McKenna, 2006).

Grouping temporary staffing agencies and consulting agencies in the same category might seem strange to some readers. Faulconbridge and his co-authors (2009, p. 801) suggest, for instance, that temporary staffing agencies work “at the ‘bottom’ unskilled end of the market”, while consultancies tend to be associated with elite professions (Skovgaard Smith, 2013). However, my field research with both professional recruiters and management consultants reveals parallels between these activities. On the one hand, although temporary staffing does not normally concern the most senior positions, it would be wrong to restrict it to unskilled labour. For example, headhunters often work for agencies that simultaneously propose classical recruitment services, temporary staffing, and consulting. These agencies use their networks to connect workers with employers according to specific needs, but the employment relationship can take various forms, including a triangular relationship where the worker is employed permanently or temporarily by the recruitment agency. In the cases I observed, the workers temporarily staffed by recruitment agencies were usually highly educated and specialised in their fields.

On the other hand, my observations at a management consulting firm show that the work of consultants, especially at the beginning of their career, is not very different from that of temporarily staffed workers. While the managers’ role is to find clients, the junior consultants are sent to work on projects at client firms where they undertake all kinds of activities. One of the main differences from other forms of temporary staffing is that these workers are usually part of a team of consultants and can count on the support of the manager who secured the contract in case of unforeseen problems. Their status – or the way they are perceived – within the firm can also be different, in particular if they work for a well-known consultancy. However, I argue that despite these differences, the logic of outsourcing costs, increasing flexibility, and obtaining needed skills for short-term contracts is very similar for both consulting and temporary staffing agencies.

In this section, I take as an example the case of a management consulting firm to show that professional mobility does not necessarily involve long-term relocation, but also – and increasingly – takes the form of short-term travel. Like recruitment and relocation agents, consultancies act as intermediaries between workers and employers. However, instead of facilitating the establishment of a long-term relationship between these actors, they foster a demand-based model in which workers are allocated to projects on a short-term basis only. This system involves a complex mobility management infrastructure that enables consultancies to offer flexibility and efficiency to their clients. Although specific to a professional sector that involves both migrant and non-migrant mobile workers, this case study contributes to the general discussion on highly skilled mobility in two main ways. First, it sheds light on the dynamics that are profoundly transforming the international business sector, in particular regarding how companies recruit workers, mobilise expertise, and define talent. Second, it builds on the experience of extremely mobile professionals

to argue that mobility and flexibility are increasingly becoming a standard part of working relationships.

This analysis builds on personal experience: for the past 3 years, my partner has worked as a management consultant at one of the world's largest consulting firms. The firm is a globally renowned professional services company that employs more than 200,000 people, and is also one of the main consultancies in Switzerland. I reflect here on both my personal relationship with this firm and the situation of other consultants whom I met through my partner at events organised within the framework of his company.

When my partner started this job, I realised that it would also have implications for my life: first of all, it became impossible to make long-term plans since his assignments were short-term and constantly changing; secondly, he constantly moved from client to client and was often away from home; and finally, his work was not only very demanding but the company also encouraged him to participate in informal events with colleagues during his free time. When I started my research, I decided to use this experience as a way to better understand how a multinational firm – whose business model relies on providing flexibility and expertise to clients – deals with mobility. My partner was later given an assignment in Basel – where I was working – which enabled me to participate in his professional life away from home. During that year, I lived with him in business hotels and accompanied him to many informal work-related events. This experience, as well as the many discussions I had with him and his colleagues, enabled me to better grasp what the life of an extremely mobile professional can be like, and to actively discuss our situated perspectives. I use these insights here to analyse the role of management consultants for providing expertise and flexibility to client firms.

Methodological Reflections About the Field Research

Although I have already discussed this experience in the methodological section, I would like to reflect further on my situated perspective during the field research on consulting.

Firstly, it is obvious that, like in any research, my position oriented and limited the kind of data that I could access. As an employee's partner, I was only allowed to participate in social events outside of the workplace (e.g. Christmas parties, after-work meetings, gatherings at employees' homes, birthday parties, dinners at restaurants, squash games), and my access to the field relied mainly on my partner's connections. My data on consulting were thus built on observations at these events, as well as on informal conversations with my partner and his colleagues, readings of the academic literature on this topic, and further materials such as the company's website, internal working

(continued)

documents, and digital tools that my partner showed me. Moreover, since my partner occupied a lower position in the company's professional hierarchy, I had more contact with beginner consultants than with managers and other executives.

Secondly, I think that my experience as an employee partner, my feelings during this period, and the way of life I adopted constitute important parts of this research. I realised that a consulting job is intense not only for the employees, but also for the people surrounding them. When my partner started his new job, I immediately felt myself to be in competition with his employer, because the long working hours, frequent travel, numerous after-work events, and new norms, values, and expectations imposed on him by the company forced us both to transform our daily lives. I experienced this situation negatively at first and making it a research subject helped me to deal with it. Instead of feeling excluded and foolish, I could take an active part in this experience and even benefit from it. Moreover, our situation greatly improved after he was posted with a client in Basel, where I was already working, since it enabled us to stay together in hotels sponsored by his employer. In addition to providing us with more time together, this experience introduced me to the "expat" life of consultants on assignments (I use the term "expat" here because that is the way my partner's colleagues informally referred to themselves during this time). Despite my peculiar position, I think that my presence among this group of consultants was accepted partly because many of them would have liked to spend more time with their partners as well.

My situated position thus made me particularly aware of the impact that a consulting position can have on a person's private life. Moreover, it enabled me to directly observe the daily organisation of work and mobility outside of official working hours. If confidentiality rules prevented me from analysing the content of my partner's assignments in details, my research highlights important aspects of a consultant's job by focusing on the connections between professional and private life. The analysis also reflects my critical questioning during this time about why consultants exist in the first place.

4.2.1 Constructing an Elite Status

Since its creation in the 1930s, management consulting has become a highly respected profession associated with expertise, knowledge, and success (McKenna, 2006; Skovgaard Smith, 2013). According to Christopher McKenna – the author of a detailed book on the history of management consulting – consultants have contributed to restructuring most of today's largest corporations and have also gained crucial influence among governments and non-profit organisations. By the end of the twentieth century, this profession had become the top career choice for business school graduates in Europe and America (2006, p. 4). The main advantages

associated with management consulting are potentially high salaries, elite status, and access to a competitive world that can lead to valuable corporate experience and rapid career advancement.

In Switzerland, the influence of management consulting started during the 1980s. Mach and his co-authors (Mach et al., 2011) write that revenues from consulting in Switzerland grew by 12 times over 20 years, reaching 1.2 billion Swiss francs in 2001. Similarly, the market shares of the largest consulting firms in Switzerland increased from 55% to 76% between 1986 and 2006. This evolution coincided with a process of intense internationalisation in the Swiss economy. While 15 of the 20 largest consulting firms were of Swiss origin in the mid-1980s, this trend was reversed by 2007 with only four Swiss consulting firms left, the rest being predominantly of US origin. American consulting firms, in particular McKinsey & Company, contributed to restructuring many Swiss companies, including Nestlé, Sandoz,¹⁸ and UBS. These firms encouraged companies to adopt shareholder value principles by reducing staff and distributing profits to shareholders rather than investing them in the company (Mach et al., 2011, p. 94).

The success of the management consulting business model – which consists of selling external expertise for identifying organisational problems and proposing changes and solutions – has puzzled many authors (e.g. Armbrüster, 2004; Skovgaard Smith, 2013). The economist Robin Hanson (2012) summarises the issue with the following words:

The puzzle is why firms pay huge sums to big-name consulting firms, when their advice comes from kids fresh out of college, who spend only a few months studying an industry they previously knew nothing about. How could such quick-made advice from ignorant recent grads be worth millions? Why don't firms just ask their own internal recent college grads?

Interestingly, leading consulting firms' approach to recruiting their employees strongly contrasts with the practices of other firms (Armbrüster, 2004). Rather than looking for experienced workers whose skills exactly fit the needs of a specific position, consulting firms prefer young graduates from top universities who can easily adapt to a variety of tasks. Of course, this choice follows an economic rationality – younger employees are less expensive than more senior and experienced ones – and also corresponds to the profession's requirements, as consultants constantly need to move from client to client and from task to task. However, this profile of multi-tasking consultants conflicts with the image of an expert whose value is built upon his or her experience, and it seems illogical that client companies would pay huge amounts of money for the advice of such young professionals. This paradox leads us to the question of the construction of consultants' value.

Most authors answer this question by pointing to the symbolic dimension of management consulting, which derives from both the prestige associated with leading consulting firms and the external position of consultants to client firms (Armbrüster, 2004; Hanson, 2012; McKenna, 2006; Skovgaard Smith, 2013). On

¹⁸Sandoz merged with Ciba-Geigy in 1996 to become Novartis. I must specify that, despite my name, I have no connection with this branch of the Sandoz family.

the one hand, prestige rests on various markers that signal elite status, such as highly selective recruitment practices (Armbrüster, 2004), the active promotion of professional norms and values (McKenna, 2006), the cultivation of a mystique about consultants' concrete activities (Skovgaard Smith, 2013), the presence of many (former) consultants in influential positions,¹⁹ and the display of success markers such as visible corporate buildings and luxurious business events. On the other hand, external status enables consultants to act as "knowledge brokers" (McKenna, 2006, p. 16) who can transfer "solutions" and innovation from one firm to the other, while maintaining an impartial position. This contributes to enhancing their legitimacy for the client firm. Christopher McKenna insists on the liability dimension, arguing that consultants have become central actors for CEOs to legitimise their management decisions and protect themselves in case of legal action. Irene Skovgaard Smith uses anthropological theories about magic to explain the mechanisms of consultants' influence within companies. She argues that organisational members tend to attribute particular abilities to consultants due to the fact that they see them as both "extremely skilled" and "neutral" with regard to internal conflicts. This position enables consultants to take sides in favour of certain changes and to rally opponents to their opinion since their approach is perceived as rational and unbiased.

To explore the question of consultants' value further, I would like to analyse some of the strategies on which the "elite" status of consultants relies. In particular, I consider the question of recruitment to be central. Associated with this is a specific perception about the value of "talent" in businesses, which offers interesting insights into our discussion about skills and competition. To begin, I will tell the story of a young man who was hired as a consultant at one of the world's largest service firms.

4.2.2 Portrait: The Early Career of a Management Consultant

Marco²⁰ was 24 when he started working for a management consulting company. Swiss and Swedish by nationality, he grew up in a middle-class family in these two countries. His father was a self-employed translator, his mother a secondary school teacher. After graduating with excellent marks in bioengineering at a leading Swiss university, he worked for a year through an agency as a temporary worker in a life sciences company. He was then recommended for a business analyst position at a management consulting firm by a friend who was finishing his studies at the same university. This friend was doing an internship at this company after having been recruited at a job fair on the university campus. He forwarded Marco's CV to a manager who invited him to an interview. After this encounter, the manager enrolled him in the firm's official selection process.

¹⁹For instance, the renowned management consulting firm McKinsey & Company had produced more CEOs than General Electric (one of the world's largest corporations at that time) by 1999. Moreover, former consultants from McKinsey ran Morgan Stanley, American Express, IBM, Polaroid, and Delta Airlines, among others (Colvin, 1999; quoted in McKenna, 2006, p. 4).

²⁰Research participants' names have been changed to maintain their anonymity.

As part of this selection process, Marco completed an online assessment which included a maths and English test, followed by a simulation where he had to work with an interactive mailbox. The simulation involved answering emails, delegating tasks, and taking quick decisions based on limited information. He was then invited for a one-day evaluation with several other candidates, where his ability to solve and present case studies both in a group and alone was evaluated by a team of senior consultants. His social skills and general behaviour were also evaluated through interviews. At the end of the day, a consultant informed him that he had succeeded and would soon receive an employment contract.

On his 1st day, Marco received a laptop, a backpack, and an account on the company's intranet. He then immediately started to work under the supervision of the manager who had first interviewed him. Although he was officially based in Geneva, he did not have a permanent work space there and almost always worked at clients' offices, at home, or while travelling. From the beginning, it was clear that Marco was not supposed to record the amount time he spent working, and that he was expected to be available outside official office hours. He was also constantly invited to after-work parties and other networking events. In the beginning, his manager mainly asked him to work on administrative tasks and PowerPoint presentations. She also gave him time to learn to use new software and to attend training offered by his employer. In fact, Marco received a checklist of tasks that he was expected to complete during his 1st year of employment. Interestingly, the checklist included meeting colleagues from other departments and attending social events in addition to tasks related directly to his consulting work.

During his 1st year, Marco worked for six clients based in the Lake Geneva region, alternating between them for periods ranging from 1 day to 3 months. His main assignment involved helping his manager develop projects for potential clients, but if this client was not paying them yet, he was regularly assigned to more profitable projects for short periods. Some of his tasks were very repetitive, others more challenging. Apart from his computer skills, he used little of the technical knowledge acquired during his studies although he did learn a lot about business, marketing, and communication. As time went by, he was given more responsibilities and possibilities to interact directly with clients.

At the end of his 1st year, Marco was evaluated based on both the amount of revenue that he had generated for the company and on reviews by his colleagues and superiors. In fact, all the employees at his hierarchical level were evaluated and ranked according to their performance. Those who "outperformed expectations" received a higher bonus than those who "reached expectations", and it was made clear to everyone that those who did not meet expectations should either improve quickly or find another job. In fact, Marco realised that a large number of people who had started around the same time as himself had already left the company. For his part, he was promoted from business analyst to consultant and his salary increased accordingly.

During his 2nd year of employment, Marco was assigned to a data management project in Northern Switzerland at the headquarters of a multinational company. This time he was not sent to temporarily fill a gap; he was "sold" to the client for his

technical skills as part of a team of eight employees from his company. In fact, the client firm was undergoing an important transformation and about 150–200 consultants from Marco's company, divided into several teams, had been hired to carry out various projects, with about 30 people coming from another branch based in England. Most of them – including Marco – lived in hotels during the week and travelled home for the weekend. Marco estimated that his team cost the client about 10,000 Swiss francs (8800 euros) per day. Interestingly, even though the project eventually ran for more than 2 years, the team always regarded it as temporary and the contracts with the client had to be renewed every 3 months, meaning that Marco was never certain for how long he would continue to work for this client.

Marco learnt a lot on the job and quickly took the technical lead in the project. In addition to his own team, he was in daily contact with a firm in India that was in charge of processing data for the client company. He also collaborated with a team in Argentina from one of the branches of the consulting company and with several teams belonging to the client company in the US, Ukraine, Brazil, and France among others. Even though he travelled less than other members of his team, his specific tasks led him to visit the client's European branches for business trips that usually lasted 2 or 3 days. He was also sent to the US to develop an interactive visualisation tool intended to improve the client's data management processes. His manager presented him to the client as having expertise in the necessary software because he had worked with it during a previous project; however, he had no experience of the IT tool involved and had to learn about it during the assignment. In fact, he considers himself lucky that no experienced user at the client firm supervised his work, because in his opinion he would not have been able to maintain his credibility as an expert.

When Marco decided to resign from this job to find something more stable, closer to home, and that better reflected his values, he had just been promoted to the position of senior consultant. He was still working on the same restructuring project, even though almost all of his team members had been replaced, especially those lower down in the hierarchy. Resigning was not difficult, since his superiors were used to constant change in their teams. They all reacted supportively, letting him know that he would be welcome to come back if he wanted to. Although finding a position that met his expectations was not as easy as he had thought, Marco was able to start an interesting new job 4 months after having resigned from the previous one. Today, he considers his experience as a consultant enriching, but he is also happy to have found more stability with his new job.

4.2.3 Recruiting Consultants

Marco's story illustrates several interesting aspects of management consultants' careers and their relationships with clients. I will focus on the recruitment process, which plays an important role in the construction of consulting firms' reputations. Associated with this process are the marketing and communication strategies that

consulting firms use to attract candidates, as well as the evaluation of consultants' work, which contributes to continual on-the-job selection.

Marco decided to apply for the position after his friend suggested recommending him. However, Marco already knew about this firm and about its competitors, because management consulting firms were in general very visible on his university campus. They regularly participated in job fairs, sponsored events, and offered special workshops to inform potential candidates about careers in consulting. In his study on the recruitment process of management consultants, Armbrüster (2004) notes that targeted marketing on the campuses of leading universities and business schools is a distinct strategy of management consulting firms. This practice enables them both to attract and select a large number of candidates who correspond with their definition of talent while also increasing their rejection rate, which is one of the figures used to legitimise the quality of their recruitment process to clients (Franck & Pudack, 2000). This tactic is one of the central tools that management consulting companies use to construct elite status.

According to Armbrüster and Schmolze (1999), nearly all top-tier consulting firms rely on case study interviews for selecting employees. Interestingly, this method contrasts strongly with the selection practices of other industries and service sectors that recruit university graduates. While the case study interview was first introduced by McKinsey & Company in the 1980s and was directly inspired by exercises at the Harvard Business School, other firms rely on more recent selection techniques developed by psychologists and human resources specialists. Moreover, in most consulting firms, managers with little training in staff recruitment supervise the selection of candidates, while many other firms delegate this task to specialists. In this context, Armbrüster reasonably asks how consulting firms manage to legitimise the quality of their recruitment processes if they use outdated methods and untrained assessors (Armbrüster, 2004, pp. 1249–1251).

Armbrüster calls attention to the signalling effect of such processes, as well as to the subjectification of consulting staff to a specific rationality model. On the one hand, the distinctive recruitment procedure of consulting companies distinguishes them from their clients by signalling their focus on specific skills, values, and success models. In particular, the Harvard Business School case studies symbolise elite business training, associated with quantitative analytical skills and data-driven objectivity. On the other hand, even though the recruitment process only partially tests the concrete competences that consultants actually need, it enables the selection of people who agree to master and display a specific type of behaviour. To quote Armbrüster, "Consulting firms hire those individuals who best correspond to the expected form of information processing and frameworks set by the interviewers" (p. 1261).

My research suggests that consulting firms rely to a large degree on universities and business schools for preselecting candidates. Excellent grades serve as an indicator of candidates' ability to learn, whereas parallel engagements signal a willingness to juggle multiple activities and assume responsibility for projects. At the same time, these criteria contribute to the social selection of candidates (Bourdieu, 1966).

The reputation of the schools in which candidates have studied is for instance central in signalling conformity to a specific and culturally situated model of excellence. Preparation for the case study interview also serves as an indicator of both the candidate's motivation and their readiness to conform to the firm's requirements. These various elements contribute to a selection of candidates based not only on skills, but also on social origin.

In fact, consulting firms' recruitment processes are subject to important investments, which also contribute to their notoriety. For instance, there are specific preparation booklets and online resources for graduates considering a career in consulting (e.g. Cheng, 2012; Consultingcase101, 2017; Cosentino, 2009). There are also clubs on university campuses whose explicit goal is to help their members enter a consulting firm (e.g. Wharton Consulting Club, EPFL Consulting Society, ETH and University of Basel Graduate Consulting Club). Even though Marco was able to enter the firm without much preparation, I met people who had trained for months for the interview. For many of them, consulting represented a dream job and a life objective. Consulting firms have thus managed to attain the status of an ideal profession within the social milieus that they target, and continue to invest considerable resources into attracting motivated candidates. These investments not only contribute to their reputation but also ensure the constant renewal of applicants.

A second interesting aspect is the fact that the selection process does not end with recruitment. On the contrary, Marco's experience shows that junior consultants are constantly evaluated, and the fact that so many of them resign during their 1st months of employment indicates a strict filtering process, which involves both self-selection and selection by the firm. This process relies to a large extent on employees' ability to handle the stress and uncertainties associated with long working hours, constant change, and high-performance requirements. It also depends on their ability to get assigned to projects and to generate revenue. For instance, Marco had to be paid by clients 80% of his working time in order to reach his performance assessment objectives. In this sense, Armbrüster's argument that the role of recruitment processes in consulting firms is more to signal excellence than to test actual competences seems accurate. Indeed, the actual selection of candidates happens largely before and after the official case study interview, through the evaluation of both educational achievement and on-the-job performance. Moreover, the fact that major consulting firms do not have difficulty attracting candidates means that they can afford to "wear down" their younger recruits by asking for as much work as possible until they resign and are replaced by new candidates. In this sense, the system relies on the constant selection and replacement of less efficient employees.

In a series of short videos used at Marco's company to train new employees, the firm's directors and partners define what makes a good consultant from their perspective. Interestingly, their main focus is on social skills and behavioural aspects, including curiosity, empathy, humour, and accountability. They also highlight the importance of getting out of one's comfort zone, experimenting, thinking outside the box, continually learning, and seizing opportunities. It is considered crucial that candidates are able to work in a team, take initiative, anticipate the needs and desires

of superiors, and develop a trusting relationship with clients. Furthermore, a good consultant should be flexible, passionate, and always aim for excellence. Technical skills and subject-specific knowledge are never mentioned in these videos. Consultants are not defined by their existing knowledge but by their ability to learn and adapt. The fact that they are smart is presented as obvious, due to their education and presence in the firm. In contrast, social competences are presented as a main marker of success.

Rather than subject-specific experts, consultants construct themselves as smart and talented people who can adapt and learn quickly. Because of the selectivity of this performance-oriented environment, remaining part of the firm becomes a proof of excellence and is regularly rewarded through bonuses and promotions. I noticed during my field research that many consultants tend to disparage expertise built on formal training. If elite education is necessary to enter the job, expertise is conceived as the product of concrete work. In terms of this logic, the value of an employee directly depends on their resilience to the harsh work conditions and on the revenue they generate through projects. However, this perspective also tends to naturalise socially inherited attributes by presenting them as markers of a person's hard work rather than as the result of a specific type of education and background.

Of course, if the representation of consultants as non-specialised “fast learners” is transmitted within the firm, it needs to be nuanced when communicated to clients. In most cases, managers sell “experts” to carry out specific projects. Marco's story shows that this purported expertise is sometimes tenuous, and it is probable that clients are – at least to some extent – aware that the young consultants working for them may not be as experienced as promised. Yet I argue that expertise and prestige are not the only reason for firms to employ consultants. Even though the elitist flair of consulting firms certainly contributes to their success, client firms are not as naïve as certain authors argue when it comes to symbolic aspects. My field research suggests that beyond legitimacy and knowledge, consultants also provide flexible work, and this characteristic is a central reason for firms to hire them.

4.2.4 Providing Flexible Labour

A manager in the banking sector explained to me that one of the reasons he employed consultants was to immediately have an operational team without spending money on hiring, since members of a consulting team can be easily replaced if they are not as efficient as expected or if the needs of the project change. Hence, even if consultants are more expensive than internal employees in terms of hourly wages, their cost can be compensated by savings in terms of time investment, social security costs, and efficiency.

This attitude is more reminiscent of temporary staffing agencies than elite consultancies specialising in strategy management. Nevertheless, my field research indicates that the work of consultants involves delivering not only strategy plans but also concrete implementation products. In this regard, the company that I investigated might differ from other firms strictly specialising in business evaluation and

planning, the epitome of which is McKinsey & Company. Nevertheless, my case study focused on one of the largest and fastest-growing consultancies in the world. Moreover, I noticed a broader tendency in large consultancies to diversify services. If the McKinsey model has influenced contemporary representations of management consulting, this model encompasses only a small part of the profession's current diversity. Coming back to Marco's example, his job was called management consulting because his managers negotiated directly with the executive management of client firms. In practice, however, his activities often consisted of delivering products that internal employees might just as well have delivered.

Companies thus employ consultants for all kinds of tasks. For instance, I heard one consultant complaining about having spent 6 h copy-pasting information from one file to another, and another laughing at having been briefly appointed to an interior decoration project. At a time when Swiss banks were trying to avoid penalties from the US government, many consultants were employed to check transactions with certain suspicious clients and to flag dubious activities for specialised lawyers. In these cases, firms were not paying for consultants' knowledge or expertise but for their ability to be immediately operational and subsequently easily dismissed.²¹ Marco, for example, related an experience where he was suddenly told – in the middle of the work day – to collect his belongings and leave the building in which he had been working for weeks because the client had unexpectedly decided to cancel the project.

These observations highlight an interesting point: if consulting companies promote adaptation rather than specialisation, they simultaneously support the “finding the right person” logic in client companies by providing them with the skills they want at the time they want and for the duration they want. In this sense, consultancies assume the task of selecting, training, and moving workers in the place of client companies. Furthermore, they enable their clients to minimise the risks of hiring by offering easily replaceable workers. Hence, the value of consulting companies not only derives from their workers but also from their infrastructure, which enables them to meet demands quickly, mobilise operational workers, and offer guarantees of success in case of problems or unexpected changes. In the next section, I expand on the issue of mobility management in consulting companies because it plays a central role in their functionality and business success.

4.2.5 *Managing Mobility Infrastructures*

The flexibility of consultants relies on a series of elements (provided by client firms) that constitutes a “mobility infrastructure” (see Xiang & Lindquist, 2014) which enables consulting firms to constantly adapt to their clients' demands and move

²¹In these projects, banks hire consultants partly because of their external status – which may be necessary from a legal perspective – but also because of the project's size and a lack of available professional auditors. In several cases, the consulting firm had to “borrow” teams from other branches (e.g. from France and the UK) to meet the client's demand.

quickly from project to project. The example of Marco's firm highlights several important components of this infrastructure.

First, the multinational yet decentralised structure of the company enables the rapid mobilisation of people. Most branches in the company I studied are structured according to national territories (e.g. the French branch, the Argentinian branch) and enjoy considerable autonomy. Some branches are subdivided between two countries. This is the case in the Swiss division, which forms a branch together with another European country. Because of this particularity, employees from both divisions have regular occasions to meet, for instance during joint training. Foreign employees are often sent to work on projects in Switzerland and vice versa. This structure enables the company managers to access a large stock of workers and to mobilise them quickly according to the clients' demands. Marco's restructuring project is a perfect example: although 150–200 consultants were continuously present at the client's headquarters, the individuals changed according to the project's needs. Because the resources of the Swiss division were not sufficient, many consultants were sent from other countries to complement the teams. The company even hired independent consultants from abroad in some cases, or consultants from other companies when their own human resources were no longer sufficient. In addition, Marco's team regularly collaborated with branches of the company in countries where their client also had branches. In this way, they were able to negotiate in person with the managers at client headquarters while at the same time offering international implementation support through their colleagues based in other countries.

This mode of working necessitates an involvement with national immigration regulations. For instance, I met a consultant who was in charge of making sure that foreign consultants had the necessary authorisation for working in Switzerland on a specific project that involved international mobility. Although European consultants can enter the country freely, they still need authorisation to work as foreign service providers. However, they do not always need to deal with this administrative paperwork, in particular when they come for a few days only. Moreover, the distinction between business trips – which do not require a work permit – and short-term work – which does – is often unclear. At the same time, the owners of the company are concerned about their reputation, in particular because they also offer global mobility services and present the firm's employees as field experts. Therefore, when local immigration authorities increased their controls and imposed fines on people working without authorisation, the managers reacted quickly by demanding a list of foreign employees and appointing a consultant to check their status. However, this person was trained as an engineer and had no experience in migration issues, so was forced to learn on the job. This example illustrates the flexibility and impressive adaptive capacity of consulting firms, which often relies on last-minute bricolages and the employees' engagement.

Equipment and materials constitute other important elements. Digital technology such as laptops and smartphones ensure that consultants are constantly reachable, can work from almost anywhere, and can move quickly from one client to another. In Marco's firm, consultants use an online communication system to contact each

other. At the end of his 1st day of employment, Marco's manager contacted him in the evening to make sure that he was reachable through this system at home, which shows the importance of constant connectedness. This system also fulfils a social control function since it openly displays when and for how long each consultant is working daily. In the morning, Marco often checked to see at what time of the night his colleagues had gone offline. He also signalled his own assiduity through this system, for instance by connecting for a final time just before bed. Consultants can also access the company's intranet from their laptop or home computers, where a huge number of employee resources and relevant data are stored, enabling collective knowledge to be conserved and recycled within the firm. One consultant mentioned in this regard: "You rarely start from nothing in a project" (personal communication, 6 November 2015).

In addition to these tools, a relatively non-bureaucratic expense system enables the working costs of mobility to be kept to a minimum. In general, administrative tasks are simplified and are the responsibility of consultants. Together with their equipment, consultants also receive a credit card which they use for (usually first-class) transportation and accommodation. They can also use the loyalty point systems offered by many hotels and airlines to finance their personal holidays. Up to a certain limit, the company accepts these expenses without question. By experiencing some of these advantages, I observed in myself and others the fascination associated with this kind of "global nomad" lifestyle. In fact, comparing notes on different hotels and loyalty systems was a favourite topic of discussion among the younger consultants whom I met regularly and for whom these advantages were as new as they were for me. In addition, consultants receive per diems. This tax-exempt compensation can represent more than 10% of a consultant's salary and constitutes an interesting gain. Of course, in most cases expenses and compensations are included in the rates invoiced to clients. Consequently, the clients bear most of the monetary costs associated with mobility, but the consultants put in the time and effort of organising business trips, often outside of official working hours. In this sense, the company offers their employees a trade-off between a relatively luxurious yet often exhausting lifestyle.

Despite the employees' constant mobility, a clear hierarchical structure and performance tracking system enable cohesion and self-discipline to be maintained within the firm. The work is generally structured in the form of projects managed by the people who secured the contract with the client. Less experienced employees navigate between projects according to immediate needs. In addition to the various ranks that signal different levels of responsibility, junior consultants usually have a counsellor and sometimes a mentor. Even if they rarely meet in person, this ensures a certain stability and security since consultants always have support in case of doubt or a problem. Each employee is also part of a broader team of people with similar projects and activities, whom they meet regularly at social events. In this way, each employee is linked to others through clear hierarchical and work relations, and the firm invests considerable resources in organising internal networking events. Moreover, self-discipline is fostered through the constant evaluation of employees at all hierarchical levels and through the definition of clear objectives. In

particular, the quantitative evaluation of employees relies on an online internal management system that details projects and working hours. This system not only enables the firm to invoice clients according to the services provided but also to track the employees' profitability by indicating their costs and benefits with precision. Furthermore, the annual assessment process is an occasion for employees to receive feedback from both superiors and colleagues, who compare achievements and set new objectives. This process directly contributes to the transmission of norms, expectations, and values within the firm.

Besides this organisational structure, the internal staffing system ensures that consultants get paid as often as possible. In most cases, staffing happens through personal contacts. For this reason, knowing people within the company and making sure that one's work is noticed by superiors is extremely important. Sometimes, the people who secure a contract with a client ask for certain employees to be part of a project team. At other times, the company owners – who are generally responsible for several teams and projects at the same time – recommend people who made a good impression. While in the beginning employees are largely interchangeable, their challenge is to progressively distinguish themselves through their specific competences and expertise. This increases their chances of being appointed to interesting projects and their ability to negotiate working conditions – for instance, the possibility of working closer to home or being promoted more quickly. It also helps managers to select the people they need for certain projects. In addition to staffing through personal contacts, there are people in charge of matching available consultants with projects. They have access to information about employees' current working situations, ranks, and areas of expertise. Based on this, they can identify employees who are not currently working and assign them to projects, sometimes for a few hours only. In the case I studied, one person was in charge of staffing about 250 employees.

Ongoing training is also important for the firm to provide clients with adequately skilled workers, and an important part of this training happens on the job. By constantly moving from firm to firm, consultants get a good overview of which skills are relevant in the current job market and can try to acquire them through observation, collaboration, and online learning. In addition, managers regularly organise presentations on new tools that consultants can then propose to their clients. Finally, the firm sponsors a large number of internal and external training opportunities. While some are compulsory, others can be chosen freely by employees according to their interests and specialisation. In fact, I observed that the firm finances many expensive internationally recognised certifications – for instance in accounting and IT project management – and the possibility of attending such training is highly valued by employees, even if part of the studying usually happens in their free time.

Finally, the readiness of employees to accept the norms and lifestyle of consulting contributes to their mobility and flexibility. In general, profit overrides personal preferences, meaning that employees need to be ready to move to where the client pays most. Sometimes, these moves are more difficult to accept. For instance, several of the consultants I met in Basel came from Geneva, and they regularly com-

plained about the fact that after the majority of the Geneva team had been sent to Basel, a team from Paris was sent to Geneva because there were not enough employees. However, I never saw them express this discontent in front of their superiors. During my time with the Basel team, I noticed that although employees did not hesitate to display the proactive and motivated behaviour expected of them in front of their superiors, they were more critical in private. In this sense, resigning from the firm after a few months was a more common strategy than actively trying to change the firm's culture. The younger consultants I met generally perceived the job as a professional springboard – a time to define their aspirations more clearly, instead of a long-term career plan. Hence, they seemed to have accepted the idea that they were temporarily exchanging demanding work for money, status, and opportunities to learn.

4.2.6 The Mechanisms of Outsourcing

I have shown that success in consulting not only relies on employees' expertise and elite status, but is also related to the fact that clients seek to externalise some of their tasks. Even though consulting teams are expensive, the flexibility that they offer, as well as their ability to assign people to projects according to immediate needs, balances their costs. In this sense, the advantage of consultancies for client companies consists in their ability to mobilise efficient and skilled teams quickly and to take responsibility for the projects they are employed for.

Consulting companies sell the work of relatively young and inexperienced graduates at very high rates. By investing in training and mobility, they ensure that their employees acquire a variety of up-to-date skills, while maintaining an interesting balance between investment and costs. The economic model of consulting companies thus derives from several factors. First, although the salaries and promotion schemes are attractive for people at the beginning of their career, the fact that they hire mostly young people and manage to place them on projects is profitable for the firms. Second, although the monthly salary of consultants is high, the fact that most consultancies do not remunerate overtime hours and expect their employees to work more than 8 h a day means that the hourly salaries are in fact not so expensive for the firms. Third, although consultancies offer interesting training opportunities to their employees, the fact that most of the learning process happens on the job during projects remunerated by clients limits these investments. Finally, although consultancies need to organise and finance the mobility of their employees, the fact that they transfer part of this responsibility directly to them – by asking them to book their own hotels and transportation, for instance – also enables them to reduce costs.

In fact, I argue that the success of consulting is directly linked to the broader logic that I described at the beginning of this chapter: While many companies invest considerable resources in attracting people who they consider to be “right” for a given position, consulting firms offer young graduates the experience and training needed in order to access such positions. The trade-off between professional and

private life expected from employees has to be understood in this context. The consulting profession is attractive to graduates partly because most companies expect a higher level of qualifications and experience when hiring. Access to the labour market has in this way become more difficult for highly educated yet inexperienced workers, and consulting has become one of the most valid entry-level options for numerous ambitious graduates.

The success of consulting firms thus relies on their ability to remain attractive while requiring a lot from their employees in terms of flexibility and time. They balance the disadvantages of constant mobility with the advantages of ongoing learning and professional status. The structure of consulting work – which is based on constantly changing projects among clearly hierarchised teams – also enables this trade-off, because it minimises the importance of individuals, at least in the lower hierarchical positions. Losing employees after a few months or years was considered normal within Marco's firm and could even become an advantage when former employees become potential clients. Losing managers was more problematic, because their personal and professional networks helped to secure new contracts. However, I noticed that many managers use a change of job as a way to advance their careers. When looking at the LinkedIn CVs of Marco's superiors, I observed that many had worked almost exclusively for the "Big Four" and that it was not uncommon to leave a company for a competitor and then return a few years later.

In this sense, the "war for talent" is actively practised by the main consulting companies, and poaching managers from direct competitors is a normal part of the system. Even if senior employees do not move between firms as often as others might, there is still a significant turnover among managers, directors, and partners, which is not necessarily negative since it enables the circulation and renewal of knowledge, expertise, and networks within the consulting sector.

Coming back to the question of externalisation, consulting firms take over the tasks of selecting, hiring, moving, and removing people for their clients. However, they also delegate the tasks of managing mobility – and the uncertainties associated with it – to their employees. In exchange, the employees gain access to salaries, training, experience, and professional status that they would probably not have received in other firms. Therefore, consulting firms gain smart, motivated, and flexible employees who they can sell at profitable rates to their clients, while the clients gain access to the skills they need, when they need them, and for the duration they need them. Of course, this system implies that workers with less experience have little other choice than to accept the trade-off between private and professional life if they want to access jobs that correspond to their ambitions. For their part, companies can continue to rely on mobility rather than training since consultancies – as well as other intermediaries – provide them with the flexible employees they need.

In this model, the frontiers between private and professional life become blurred. Differences between working and private time disappear, since even after leaving the office, employees can be called by their manager to finish a task, or they have to organise their next trip, or they are expected to attend an after-work party during which they will not only socialise but also extend their professional network. Being

a consultant's partner, I realised that this work environment did not correspond to my own expectations of family life. I also became more aware of the gendered dimension of consulting, which is tailored for people who either do not have family responsibilities or can delegate them to others.

Moreover, this work environment uses a definition of skills that goes beyond technical competences and knowledge. In fact, I think that this case study illustrates in an extreme way Urciuoli's (2008) observations on the notion of skills, since a consultant's personality, behaviour, social competences, and approach to tasks and clients are all crucial for their selection and evaluation. The value that is attributed to these behavioural traits relies on socially situated norms that lead to a strict selection of employees. Although consulting firms brand themselves as international and diverse, the way they select their employees, as well as the working environment they impose, restricts access to people with similar characteristics and values. In this context, class, gender, race, and age all contribute to structuring the social competences expected from the employees, as well as the representations of work and private life that they have to adopt in order to stay in consulting.

4.3 Mobility as the New Norm?

In this chapter, I highlighted the roles of several kinds of intermediaries that organise and enable the mobility of certain workers between firms, both within and across national borders. I questioned the idea that headhunters, recruitment agencies, and consultancies enable firms to access the "right" workers by analysing their other roles. My main objective was to show that the need for highly skilled migrants in companies results from a construction that directly involves these intermediaries, since their services influence how employers select, recruit, and retain workers.

First, I argued that headhunters not only connect workers with employers, but that they also contribute to constructing the kind of highly skilled workers that employers search for. In particular, the fact that headhunters poach candidates from competitors in the context of a perceived "war for talent" raises their value as intermediaries and constructs "good candidates" as already employed workers who can transfer specific working practices from one firm to the next.

Moreover, my research shows that professional recruiters influence the evaluation of their candidates by introducing them to employers in a favourable light and by preparing them for job interviews according to the firm's perceived expectations. The construction of a candidate's value thus also depends on the relationship between the employer and the headhunter, as well as on the strategies that the headhunter uses to introduce their candidates. Since recruitment agencies are increasingly used by companies in the current economic system, their role as "gatekeepers" (Faulconbridge et al., 2009) and co-constructors of "good candidates" (Findlay et al., 2013) should not be overlooked.

Finally, headhunters select candidates based on their perception of a firm's expectations. Because their profit depends on their candidates' success, they need to

minimise risks. For this reason, they evaluate candidates based on factors that often have nothing to do with qualifications and knowledge. Nationality, working situation, and subjective perceptions about a candidate's social characteristics play an important role. For instance, my research draws attention to the fact that headhunters often prefer to recruit candidates from neighbouring countries rather than Switzerland, because it is easier for them to attract workers who are employed in a country where the working conditions are less advantageous than Switzerland. At the same time, although some headhunters tend to reject non-EU/EFTA nationals because their admission to Switzerland might pose administrative difficulties, they may make exceptions for candidates whose nationality might constitute an added value. These observations highlight the impact of global power relations on labour market processes, as well as the importance of social characteristics in the definition of skills.

I then analysed another category of intermediaries involved in managing workers' mobility: relocation agencies, which may be involved at various stages of the mobility process. Relocation agents can motivate employees to accept new positions by informing them about local living conditions or calming fears about the personal impact of a relocation. Once a candidate has decided to move, agents can help mitigate the stress of relocation by negotiating with local authorities for work and residence permits, organising tax and insurance issues, and finding accommodation. After the move, relocation agents can facilitate economic and social integration in the local environment. This service particularly addresses the needs of accompanying partners, whose well-being is a source of concern for some companies to the extent that it can prevent economic losses associated with the early departure of employees.

By compensating some of the disadvantages associated with mobility and creating conditions in which mobility can become a socially valuable lifestyle, relocation agencies structure a particular labour mobility regime: they contribute to constructing mobility as an opportunity and a form of social promotion for workers and their families. Yet such services are not offered to all relocating workers, and my interviews show that those who receive support do not always experience relocation in a positive way. In addition, the current trend in multinational companies seems to be a reduction of investment in relocation support by replacing tailored services with fixed financial allocations, expatriation contracts with local contracts, and long-term stays with short-term business trips (Cartus, 2014; Davoine & Salamin, 2012; Le Temps, 2015). In this context, an employing company's approach to mobility, as well as the economic situation and definition of current needs, are often more important than a candidate's characteristics for determining the allocation of relocation support. Moreover, while corporate relocation support tends to be decreasing, the pressure on employees to be more mobile and flexible seems to be increasing.

In the second section, I analysed the role of a major consulting firm in providing expertise and labour to client companies. I argued that the success of such firms relies not only on their ability to provide expert knowledge but also on their ability to allocate workers flexibly to projects according to demand. In this sense, such service providers can be seen as an alternative to long-term employment: by assum-

ing the risks of recruitment and by offering a mobility infrastructure that enables the constant movement of workers from place to place, firm to firm, and project to project, consulting firms take over the role of both headhunters and relocation agencies. To do so, they need to attract motivated workers who accept an extremely mobile and flexible lifestyle. In compensation for demanding working conditions, they offer high salaries, rapid promotion pathways, elite status, and the possibility of learning from a variety of work situations and training opportunities. In a context where firms increasingly seek workers who are immediately effective, I argue that consulting firms propose a trade-off to young and ambitious workers by offering them the professional experience necessary to access prestigious positions while expecting complete engagement in the company in return, even if this means temporarily sacrificing their private lives.

These observations led me to several conclusions. First of all, both this chapter and the previous one highlighted that migration is not just an individual decision; it is strongly influenced by the strategies of governments and economic actors to attract, select, and retain those from whom they expect economic benefits. While governments focus on categories of socially acceptable immigrants, companies manage regimes of labour mobility that are partly independent from state immigration policies. Moving workers from place to place for increasingly shorter durations has become part of their function. At the same time, companies have an interest in retaining efficient employees and thus also set up integration strategies for them and their families. In these processes, governments remain important actors for defining the legal apparatus, spaces, and local conditions in which mobility and integration take place. Yet it is interesting to see that contrary to the recruitment of long-term foreign employees, the mobility of service workers and business travellers is generally absent from immigration statistics and is subject to different regulations (Sassen, 1995). Apart from work permits, the state exercises little control over this kind of mobility (Lavenex, 2007). Some people are thus able to avoid immigration regulations by becoming “mobile workers” instead of “immigrants”. Migration intermediaries contribute to this transition by taking part of the responsibility for organising the moves of these workers.

I have shown how short-term labour mobility influences the norms and practices of recruitment processes within companies. I will further argue that short-term labour mobility influences not only the working conditions of highly qualified workers, but also the employment and migration opportunities for other categories of people. I borrow here Nina Glick Schiller and Noel Salazar’s argument that the concept of “mobility regimes” enables the analysis of “the relationships between the privileged movements of some and the co-dependent but stigmatised and forbidden movement, migration and interconnection of the poor, powerless, exploited” (see also Franquesa, 2011; Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013, p. 188).

The interconnection between different forms of mobility is nicely illustrated in the case of the hotels in which I stayed due to my experience accompanying my partner on short-term business trips. This category of hotels hosted mainly business travellers and consultants. Since their amenities included a reception, a bar, a restaurant, a gym, and a daily room-cleaning service, they employed a large staff of hotel

and restaurant professionals as well as more invisible workers such as electricians, plumbers, cleaners, kitchen workers, and so on. In fact, it was surprising to discover the number of hotels in the Basel area and the fact that they can be fully booked at certain times of the year.²² Hence, business travel not only necessitates a mobility infrastructure within companies, but also transforms cities by creating a demand for a variety of services intended to accommodate these travellers.

Although my research did not focus on this aspect, studies by other authors show that the hotel and restaurant sector in Switzerland employs significant numbers of immigrants. For instance, statistics from the Swiss Secretariat for Migration (SEM) indicate that a majority of EU/EFTA labour immigrants came to Switzerland to work in this sector in 2016 (State Secretariat for Migration, 2017). In this sense, the mobility of the highly skilled both generates and is made possible by a migration industry that employs significant numbers of people of different nationalities with different levels of skills and employment conditions (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Nyberg Sørensen, 2013). Headhunters, relocation agents, administrative staff, and hotel employees all contribute to defining the conditions in which highly skilled mobility takes place. Moreover, my personal experience as a consultant's partner made me particularly aware of the fact that a highly mobile lifestyle forces workers to delegate part of their domestic tasks to others, commonly a spouse or other family member. This lifestyle thus fosters a clear division between professional and domestic tasks, which can contribute to reproducing stereotypical gender roles.

A third point concerns the issue of flexibility, and it is interesting to observe that the business model of all the intermediaries I mentioned in this chapter relies for a large part on this notion. Headhunters, relocation agents, and consultants need to be extremely flexible in order to respond to the demands of their clients. At the same time, their role primarily consists in reducing the costs associated with the mobility of their clients by connecting workers with jobs and by enabling smooth transitions from one position to the next. In this sense, client firms transfer some of the costs of mobility management to these intermediaries, which enables them to access workers that meet their immediate needs more easily. Yet this process also transforms the notion of "need". Intermediaries not only facilitate efficient matches between companies, jobs, and people, they also transform employers' expectations and practices by providing new options for hiring. This changes the norms of international corporate competition: access to flexible, highly skilled labour becomes a requirement, and a lack of access is redefined as a problem that needs an immediate solution. Hence, intermediaries not only respond to demand, but they also create it.

The last point that I would like to develop concerns the issue of flexibility at an individual level. The people working as intermediaries all insisted on the flexible nature of their jobs, either because they constantly need to move (in the case of consultants), or because they need to find candidates quickly and creatively who

²²According to the Basel tourism office, the city and its surroundings include 9800 hotel rooms for a city of about 200,000 inhabitants. Finding a hotel during events such as Baselworld (an international watch and jewellery industry trade show) and Art Basel (an international art fair) is extremely difficult because the prices rise significantly, and rooms are booked months in advance.

correspond to an employing company's expectations (in the case of headhunters), or because they offer tailor-made services that need to be adapted to each new client and situation (in the case of relocation agents). Although these jobs can be very profitable, they also present many risks and necessitate the full commitment of the individuals concerned. Here I introduce the German concept of *Entgrenzung* as an interesting way to reflect further on this situation.

Entgrenzung interprets the transformations that have occurred in the labour market since the 1980s in Germany and other industrialised countries. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the transition from a communist to a capitalist system of labour encouraged many authors to reflect on the consequences of such transitions for workers (Jürgens & Voss, 2007). In short, *Entgrenzung* describes new forms of labour organisation that arise from the internationalisation of national economies and from a dissolution of borders within companies (Gottschall & Voss, 2005; Kratzer, 2003). These economic changes have created new requirements for employees, in particular with regard to the increasing importance of individual responsibility and flexibility in work processes. Some authors speak of a "subjectivisation of work" to describe situations in which employees are expected to adopt specific attitudes, values, and skills to suit corporate objectives and market logics (Jürgens & Voss, 2007). These transformations challenge the distinction between work and private life that was established during the industrial area through the definition of clear working and resting times. *Entgrenzung* thus implies the blurring of frontiers between work and private life and the increasing importance of economic processes in individuals' lives.

This concept shares many similarities with the *Cité par projets* developed by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (1999). Like Manuel Castells (1996), they argue that one of the main characteristics of our society is to be organised in networks. Those able to build on these networks to develop projects are considered successful and admired by their contemporaries. Valued characteristics include enthusiasm, flexibility, adaptability, autonomy, and employability. Yet, success in this system also involves detachment from material goods and from one's personality and values, since constant change from project to project forces a person to renounce both material and psychological stability.

Despite being careful not to overgeneralise these ideas about modern society, I think that they reflect to a certain extent the dynamics and value systems that I observed in different research fields. In particular, I find it interesting that some companies, while encouraging mobility, tend to outsource its costs directly to certain individuals. If being mobile and flexible can be a successful career strategy, as Boltanski and Chiapello suggest, it also risks becoming a *condition* of career success – a norm which may be difficult to avoid. For instance, one could argue that while 20 years ago companies needed to invest considerable resources in order to motivate candidates to expatriation, the idea that mobility and flexibility are intrinsic to a successful career has become so widespread that companies today have no trouble finding motivated workers who accept these conditions – despite the fact that they now receive less support and fewer advantages. In this way, mobility and flexibility are transformed from a voluntary, strategic decision into a prerequisite for

an increasing number of jobs. Of course, these observations concern mainly internationalised business sectors such as pharmaceuticals and IT, but I am sure that many of my academic colleagues will also recognise this trend in our field.

While some authors insist on the advantages of being mobile and consider mobility to be a form of capital (Dean, 2016; Kaufmann, Bergman, & Joye, 2004; Leivestad, 2016), I argue that both forced mobility and forced immobility can lead to difficult personal situations. In this sense, mobility and immobility are neither positive nor negative, but the freedom to choose one or the other constitutes a critical advantage. Hence, we should be careful not to fetishise these notions, but rather consider the range of opportunities that individuals have to reach their own aspirations.

To conclude, this chapter showed that besides state-related actors, private sector actors play an important role in structuring mobility towards, across, and within Switzerland. In a perceived “war for talent”, various intermediaries have emerged to foster access to employment for mobile and flexible workers. By facilitating professional mobility, they transform perceptions of “needs” and “shortages” with respect to recruitment processes. Moreover, by connecting employees with employers, they create new expectations with regard to skills and qualifications. In this context, immediate efficiency has become a norm difficult to avoid. This situation complicates access to the labour market for people who do not correspond to employers’ and intermediaries’ preferences, and forces an acceptance of increasingly flexible working conditions.

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