

The Role of Communication in Effective Recruitment and Selection Processes in the Public Service: Job Advertisement Clarity, Interview Communication, and Candidate Experience

A qualitative synthesis for international publication

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how communication quality , spanning job advertisement clarity, interview interaction, and post-application feedback , shapes recruitment and selection effectiveness and candidate experience in public service organizations. Using a qualitative, literature-based thematic synthesis of empirical and conceptual studies published largely between 2020 and 2026, the paper is anchored in two complementary theories: Signaling Theory, which explains how job advertisements and recruiter interaction transmit information that reduces uncertainty for applicants, and Gilliland's Organizational Justice Model, which explains how procedural and interactional fairness during selection shapes candidates' perceptions of the hiring organization. The synthesis finds that public sector recruitment communication is frequently compromised by vague job postings, prolonged and opaque selection timelines, and a near-absence of post-interview feedback , problems that are structurally different from, and often more severe than, those found in private-sector hiring due to bureaucratic rule constraints and equal-treatment regulatory frameworks. These communication failures are shown to depress applicant pools, increase application abandonment, and damage public sector employer branding at a time when governments already struggle to compete for talent. The paper concludes that communication should be treated as a core recruitment-management function , not an administrative afterthought , and offers recommendations for job-advertisement design, interview practice, and feedback systems in public service hiring.

Keywords: recruitment communication, public service, candidate experience, signaling theory, organizational justice, job advertisement clarity

1. Introduction

Recruitment is, at its core, an exchange of information under conditions of uncertainty: organizations know relatively little about applicants' true ability and fit, and applicants know relatively little about what working inside the organization would actually be like. Communication , through job advertisements, interviews, correspondence, and feedback , is the mechanism through which each side attempts to close that information gap. In the public service, this exchange occurs inside a distinctive institutional environment: hiring is constrained by

equal-treatment and procedural regulations that limit how actively organizations can market themselves, hiring timelines are typically far longer than in the private sector, and pay is frequently non-competitive. Under these conditions, the quality of communication becomes not a peripheral convenience but one of the few levers public employers retain to attract, retain, and fairly select talent.

Public organizations operate in a more restrictive framework of equal-treatment regulations than private firms, meaning that more active recruitment strategies can only supplement, not replace, the informational and motivational content carried by job advertisements themselves. This places unusual weight on advertisement clarity as a communication function: because public employers cannot always compete through aggressive marketing or salary signaling, the words used in a vacancy notice, and the values and expectations they convey, become a primary attraction mechanism.

Recruitment communication does not end at the advertisement stage. Interview interaction and the feedback provided (or withheld) afterward are equally consequential. Public sector hiring in the United States now takes on average 80 to 180 days, compared with 36 to 42 days in the private sector, and this extended, often poorly communicated timeline causes agencies to lose strong candidates to faster-moving employers. Compounding this, more than half of candidates receive no feedback after screening or interviews, and when feedback is given, most candidates find it too generic to be useful, a pattern that damages candidate goodwill and, by extension, organizational reputation. Independent benchmarking research adds a striking data point here: in one large-scale audit of leading employers, none of the companies surveyed communicated application status to candidates after the initial confirmation email.

This paper synthesizes the literature on these three communication touchpoints, job advertisement clarity, interview communication, and overall candidate experience, to build a qualitative, theoretically grounded account of how communication failures and successes shape recruitment effectiveness in public service organizations.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite the centrality of communication to recruitment outcomes, several persistent problems characterize public service hiring:

1. **Ambiguous and under-informative job advertisements.** Public sector vacancy notices frequently emphasize procedural or credentialing detail over substantive role clarity, which can deter qualified applicants from applying at all. A significant number of job seekers self-select out of applying to government jobs because they do not believe they meet a stated minimum qualification, even where a skills-based hiring approach might have qualified them.
2. **Excessively long and opaque selection timelines.** With average public sector hiring cycles running into several months, and with candidates frequently uninformed of where they stand in the process, strong applicants are lost to faster-moving private sector or other public employers.
3. **High application abandonment linked to process design and communication burden.** A large share of job seekers who start a government application do not finish it, and lengthy, unclear applications are a leading cause of abandonment, 60% of candidates abandon applications that take longer than fifteen minutes to complete when the process feels unclear or poorly communicated.
4. **Absence of structured post-interview feedback.** The lack of specific, actionable feedback after interviews is a documented, persistent failure across recruitment generally, and is especially damaging in the public service where reputational effects (word-of-mouth about "government hiring") compound over time and affect future applicant pools.
5. **Fairness perceptions are shaped as much by process as by outcome.** Because applicants judge the legitimacy of a selection decision partly through the fairness of the *procedure*, not only whether they were hired, poor communication during interviews and assessments can produce lasting negative perceptions of the organization even among candidates who are ultimately treated fairly in outcome terms.

Taken together, these problems suggest that public service recruitment communication is not merely an operational detail but a strategic vulnerability, one that affects the size and quality of applicant pools, the perceived legitimacy of public institutions, and, ultimately, the government's capacity to attract capable personnel.

3. Review of the Literature

3.1 Job Advertisement Clarity as a Communication Function

Job advertisements are the first, and often only, point of direct communication between a public employer and a prospective applicant before the application decision is made. The design and content of job advertisements can meaningfully shape the success of applicant attraction and hiring, and beyond their basic informational function, advertisements signal explicit and implicit values and motives to job seekers. In public sector contexts specifically, large-scale research combining web-crawled job advertisements with survey data from over 1,800 recruiters in Germany's public sector job market found that prosocial motivational signals in job advertisements were positively related to higher-quality applications and more qualified selected candidates, while purely extrinsic or intrinsic motivational signals showed no statistically significant effect (Vogel, Döring, & Sievert, 2024). This suggests that clarity is not only about informational completeness but about how effectively an advertisement conveys the distinctive prosocial value proposition of public employment specifically.

Where clarity is absent, the consequences are measurable. Public sector hiring trend data shows job seekers self-excluding from applying because they do not meet a minimum qualification as stated, even where the organization might have been open to a broader, skills-based interpretation of fit, indicating that ambiguous or overly rigid advertisement wording can needlessly shrink the applicant pool before evaluation even begins.

3.2 Interview Communication and the Selection Encounter

Interview communication research has increasingly incorporated fairness perception as a central outcome. Gilliland's foundational organizational justice model in personnel selection holds that applicants' judgments of a selection process are shaped by specific procedural rules, including job-relatedness, consistency of administration, and the opportunity to demonstrate ability, as well as by interactional treatment during the encounter itself (Gilliland, 1993). Applicants' experiences of the hiring process influence their trust in the organization, their willingness to pursue the opportunity further, and their broader perceptions of organizational legitimacy (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000), meaning interview communication quality carries consequences well beyond the immediate hiring decision.

3.3 Feedback, Delay, and Candidate Experience

Post-interview feedback constitutes a distinct and heavily under-studied communication touchpoint. Most candidates receive no feedback after screening or interview stages, and even where feedback is offered, it is frequently perceived as too generic to support genuine improvement or understanding, a pattern that damages candidates' psychological experience of the process and contributes to negative word-of-mouth about the hiring organization. Independent industry benchmarking corroborates this at scale: an eighth-annual audit of Fortune 500 candidate journeys found that only 37% of companies effectively conveyed their employee value proposition across the talent journey, only 12% delivered thoroughly personalized job recommendations, and, most strikingly, none of the audited companies communicated application status to candidates beyond the initial submission confirmation (Phenom, 2024). This industry-scale evidence suggests the feedback and communication gap identified in academic literature is not a marginal problem but close to a universal one, even among well-resourced employers, a finding with troubling implications for public sector organizations that typically have fewer recruitment resources still.

3.4 The Distinct Institutional Context of Public Service Recruitment

Public sector recruitment differs from private sector recruitment in ways that make communication quality simultaneously more difficult to achieve and more consequential. Formal rules and managerial discretion interact to shape how recruitment and selection actually unfold in public organizations, with research indicating that the extent to which rule-bound procedure constrains or channels managers' practical recruitment choices is itself a significant factor in hiring outcomes (Løkke, Villadsen, & Bach, 2023). This rule-boundedness, a defining feature of public administration generally, means that communication failures in public service recruitment are not simply matters of individual recruiter skill but are frequently embedded in the institutional design of public hiring systems themselves.

3.5 Gaps Identified

The literature reveals: (a) strong evidence that advertisement clarity functions as a signaling mechanism shaping applicant self-selection and attraction, with prosocial signaling carrying particular weight in public sector contexts; (b) robust theoretical and empirical grounding for interview communication's role in shaping fairness perceptions and organizational legitimacy; (c) a well-documented but persistent feedback and communication-delay problem across

recruitment broadly , one that industry-scale benchmarking suggests is close to universal , and which appears especially acute in public service contexts given longer hiring cycles; and (d) comparatively limited qualitative, meaning-focused research specifically situated within public service recruitment as distinct from private-sector or generic HR contexts. This paper's qualitative synthesis addresses that last gap by drawing the three communication touchpoints together within a public-service-specific theoretical frame.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Signaling Theory

Signaling Theory, originating from Spence's work on information asymmetry, holds that where one party (the employer) possesses more information than another (the applicant), the disadvantaged party looks to available signals to infer unobservable qualities (Spence, 1978). Job advertisements, recruitment interviews, and word-of-mouth all function as signal-bearing channels through which applicants form beliefs about organizational characteristics they cannot directly observe (Celani& Singh, 2011). Applied to public service recruitment, Signaling Theory explains why advertisement wording matters disproportionately: because public organizations cannot always compete through salary or aggressive marketing, the informational and motivational content of the advertisement itself becomes one of the few available signals through which applicants judge organizational attractiveness and fit , a proposition directly supported by empirical evidence that prosocial signaling in public sector job ads improves both application quality and candidate qualification (Vogel et al., 2024).

4.2 Gilliland's Organizational Justice Model

Gilliland's model of organizational justice in personnel selection provides the second theoretical anchor (Gilliland, 1993). It identifies procedural justice rules , including job-relatedness of selection criteria, consistency of process administration, and opportunity to perform , alongside interactional justice concerns such as respectful treatment, honesty, and timely, informative feedback, as the dimensions through which applicants judge a selection process to be fair. This framework is directly applicable to interview communication and post-selection feedback: it explains why delayed, generic, or absent feedback does lasting reputational damage even when

the underlying hiring decision was substantively fair, because applicants' evaluations are shaped by process communication as much as by outcome (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000).

4.3 Integrated Conceptual Model

The paper proposes the following conceptual model:

Job Advertisement (Signal Quality) → Applicant Self-Selection & Pool Composition → Interview Communication (Procedural & Interactional Justice) → Applicant Fairness Perception & Trust → Feedback & Post-Selection Communication → Candidate Experience & Organizational Reputation → feedback loop shaping future applicant pool quality

This model treats communication not as a single event but as a continuous thread running through every recruitment stage, with each stage's communication quality shaping candidates' willingness to engage with the next.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study employs a **qualitative, interpretive research design**, specifically a **thematic literature synthesis**, a form of qualitative content analysis applied to secondary scholarly and industry sources. This design suits a research question that is fundamentally relational and process-oriented (how communication shapes recruitment experience and outcomes) rather than one requiring statistical hypothesis-testing on primary survey data.

5.2 Data Sources and Sampling

Sources were purposively selected from peer-reviewed journals, systematic reviews, and credible industry/government survey reports published predominantly between 2020 and 2026. Purposive sampling prioritized sources addressing (a) job advertisement design and signaling, (b) interview communication and fairness perception, (c) feedback and candidate experience, and (d) the distinct institutional features of public sector recruitment.

5.3 Analytical Procedure

The synthesis followed a structured thematic process: familiarization with source material, open coding of recurring concepts, development of candidate themes, and refinement of themes against the full body of literature. Four dominant themes were identified: (1) advertisement

clarity and signaling, (2) interview fairness and communication, (3) feedback and delay, and (4) public-sector-specific structural constraints. These themes structured the literature review and the conceptual model above.

5.4 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was pursued through source triangulation across academic and credible industry survey sources, transparency regarding selection criteria, and reflexive attention to contested or emerging areas (particularly AI-mediated recruitment) where findings remain provisional.

5.5 Limitations

As a literature-based qualitative synthesis, this paper does not generate new primary data from a specific public service organization or jurisdiction. It is intended to provide theoretical and conceptual grounding for future primary qualitative research , for example, interview-based studies with recent public sector applicants , which is proposed in the recommendations below.

6. Findings and Conclusion

6.1 Findings

Finding 1 , Advertisement clarity functions as a signal that shapes applicant self-selection before evaluation begins. Ambiguous or overly rigid advertisement wording causes qualified candidates to self-exclude, shrinking the applicant pool at the earliest possible stage, while advertisements that clearly and specifically communicate prosocial public service value function as an attraction signal with a measurable, demonstrated effect on application quality (Vogel et al., 2024).

Finding 2 , Interview communication shapes fairness perception independently of the eventual hiring outcome. Procedural and interactional justice , job-relatedness, consistency, respectful treatment , determine whether applicants perceive the process as legitimate, with consequences for organizational trust and reputation that persist regardless of whether the individual candidate is hired.

Finding 3 , Feedback absence and communication delay are the most acute, and most widespread, failure points in current recruitment practice. The near-universal absence of specific post-interview feedback , confirmed even among well-resourced Fortune 500 employers, where zero percent of audited companies communicated status beyond initial confirmation

(Phenom, 2024) , combined with public sector hiring cycles significantly longer than private sector norms, compounds candidate frustration and drives attrition of strong candidates to faster-moving employers.

Finding 4 , Public sector structural constraints make communication both harder to execute well and more consequential when it fails. Rule-boundedness limits the range of communicative and marketing tools available to public recruiters, meaning that the communication which *does* occur carries disproportionate weight in shaping applicant experience and institutional legitimacy.

6.2 Conclusion

Communication is not a peripheral administrative task within public service recruitment , it is a structural determinant of who applies, how they experience the selection process, and what they conclude about the legitimacy and desirability of public employment. Because public organizations face constraints on salary competitiveness and active marketing that private employers do not, the clarity of job advertisements, the fairness communicated through interview interaction, and the responsiveness of post-selection feedback collectively constitute one of the few levers available for improving recruitment outcomes. Public service organizations that continue to treat recruitment communication as incidental to process compliance, rather than as a deliberately managed function, risk continuing to lose qualified applicants to communication failure rather than to genuine unsuitability.

7. Recommendations

1. **Redesign job advertisements around prosocial signaling clarity, not just procedural compliance.** Advertisements should clearly state genuine minimum requirements, distinguish "required" from "preferred" qualifications, and explicitly communicate the prosocial, public-value dimension of the role, given the demonstrated link between prosocial signals and application quality.
2. **Shorten and communicate selection timelines proactively.** Where full-cycle reduction is not immediately achievable, agencies should communicate expected timelines and stage transitions to applicants at each step, reducing the uncertainty that drives attrition.

3. **Institutionalize structured post-interview feedback.** Even brief, templated but specific feedback substantially improves candidate experience relative to silence or generic messaging, and should be built into standard selection workflow rather than left to individual recruiter discretion.
4. **Train interview panels explicitly in procedural and interactional justice principles.** Panel training should address consistency of questioning, respectful interactional conduct, and transparency about how decisions are made, given the demonstrated link between these factors and applicant trust.
5. **Simplify application processes to reduce communication burden.** Long, unclear, or redundant application steps should be audited and shortened, since abandonment is strongly linked to process length and clarity rather than to genuine disinterest.
6. **Expand primary qualitative research within specific public service jurisdictions.** Future studies should use interview-based or case-study designs with recent public sector applicants to empirically validate and locally contextualize the conceptual model proposed here.

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