

Göteborg University
School of Economics and Commercial Law
Department of Business Administration
Box 610
SE 405 30 Göteborg
Sweden

Author: Lars Walter
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Abstract

Fitting Like a Glove

On Matching in a Temporary Work Agency

The history of the Swedish temporary work industry is rife with political controversies and debates over its advantages and disadvantages for workers, employers, and the labour market in general – especially its expected effects and consequences for the labour market.

Setting the motives or effects attributed to temporary work agencies aside, it may be observed that the industry experienced strong growth and became more established on the Swedish labour market since the deregulation of 1993. Each day workers are being matched with new employers and placed on new assignments. However, there are few studies of *how* this matching of workers and employers proceeds. The agencies often emphasise the importance of professionalism and their ability to match workers and employers, but the activities that constitute everyday practice are hidden or taken for granted.

The study examined such matching practices in one of the large temporary work agencies in Sweden between March 2002 and March 2003. An ethnographically inspired fieldwork was conducted at the company during two to three days per week. Three different fieldwork techniques were used: direct observation, personal interviews, and the analysis of documents.

The study shows how the recruitment and sales activities of such an agency contribute to a construction of "matching objects". Through a series of activities, such objects are brought closer and closer together, and are finally calibrated in order to be connected. The analysis reveals the central of the classification system, which contributes to the construction of objects to match and forms the matching space that allows for calibration of the objects of matching.

The character of matching activities provides the temporary work agency with a multidimensional function on the labour market. The role of the agency varies, depending on the outcome of the matching activities. Furthermore, the way in which the temporary work agency connects workers and clients through the classification system may have wider repercussions for the ways in which candidates describe themselves, and the ways in which clients describe their vacancies and assignments. Thus, the matching that occurs in temporary work agencies differs from other types of matching in the labour market, such as that which occurs through public employment services or the recruitment that occurs in client organisations.

Keywords: Matching, temporary agency work, classification

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