

# Improving Hiring Accuracy in SMEs Through Standardized Job Description Criteria: An Action Research Study

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## INTRODUCTION

Recruitment difficulties in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are often discussed in relation to labor market constraints or shortages in qualified applicants. Yet in practice, challenges may also stem from how roles are initially defined within the organization. In many SMEs, job descriptions outline broad responsibilities and minimum qualifications, but provide limited detail about the concrete knowledge, skills, or behavioral capabilities that are actually critical for effective performance. When expectations at this early stage remain imprecise, hiring decisions tend to depend more on individual judgment than on shared evaluative standards. Over time, this can lead to inconsistencies in how candidates are assessed. Although job descriptions are commonly viewed as routine administrative documents, their structural clarity may play a more substantive role in shaping recruitment judgment than is often acknowledged. Empirical research examining this issue in SME settings remains relatively limited.

Much of the existing human resource management literature has concentrated on recruitment methods, selection tools, and applicant evaluation techniques. Implicit in many of these discussions is the assumption that job requirements are already clearly specified. However, in smaller firms where HR systems evolve gradually and formalization is limited, the articulation of competency standards may itself be unstable. If job requirements are framed in generalized or abstract terms, assessment practices no matter how sophisticated, may still produce divergent conclusions because evaluators lack a consistent reference point. This suggests that improving recruitment outcomes may require attention not only to assessment procedures but also to the structural foundation upon which those procedures rest.

Against this background, the present study was conducted in a cross-border e-commerce SME and adopted an action research approach. The purpose was to explore how different ways of articulating job competencies influence recruitment judgment processes. Rather than measuring hiring effectiveness through subsequent employee performance, this study defines hiring accuracy as the perceived stability and consistency of recruitment judgments grounded in clearly articulated competency criteria. The research began with a diagnostic examination of ambiguities embedded in existing job descriptions. A standardized job description framework was then collaboratively introduced within the organization. By observing how recruitment discussions evolved following this intervention, the study seeks to clarify how greater precision in role articulation contributes to more anchored and coherent decision-making processes. In this sense, the analysis shifts attention from recruitment outcomes alone to the structural conditions that shape evaluative stability at the point of selection.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Role Ambiguity and Structural Clarity in Organizational Roles

The concept of role ambiguity has long been examined within organizational research. Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) originally described role ambiguity as a condition in which employees lack clear information regarding responsibilities, authority, or expectations associated with their position. Subsequent research has consistently linked higher levels of role ambiguity to adverse outcomes, including reduced job performance, lower job satisfaction, and increased psychological strain (Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Tubre & Collins, 2000). These studies primarily focus on employees after entry into the organization, emphasizing how unclear expectations may undermine effective functioning at work.

More recent empirical evidence continues to underscore the importance of role clarity in shaping employee attitudes and performance-related outcomes. For example, Lee et al. (2024) found that role ambiguity was associated with job insecurity and diminished work engagement within a multilevel framework. Although such studies are situated in post-entry contexts, they collectively highlight the structural significance of clearly articulated role expectations for organizational stability.

Despite the substantial body of research examining role ambiguity after employment has begun, comparatively less attention has been given to ambiguity at the recruitment stage. Before candidates are selected, organizations must first determine what a role entails and what competencies it requires. If expectations remain broadly framed or insufficiently specified, those responsible for selection may lack a stable benchmark against which applicants can be evaluated. In this sense, ambiguity may influence not only employee experiences but also the formation of recruitment judgments. Extending the concept of role ambiguity to the hiring phase therefore offers a useful perspective for examining how structural clarity shapes decision-making processes prior to organizational entry.

### Person–Job Fit and the Stability of Evaluative Benchmarks

Person–Job (P–J) fit refers to the degree of correspondence between an individual’s knowledge, skills, and abilities and the demands of a particular job (Kristof, 1996). The broader fit literature has examined how alignment between personal characteristics and work environments relates to important outcomes such as performance, satisfaction, and retention. In their meta-analysis, Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson (2005) reported that P–J fit was positively associated with job performance and organizational commitment, while negatively related to turnover intentions. These findings have contributed to the widespread view that recruitment should aim to maximize alignment between applicant attributes and job requirements.

At the same time, assessments of P–J fit are inherently comparative. Fit judgments do not exist in isolation; they depend on how job demands are defined and interpreted. If competency requirements are articulated with clarity and consistency, evaluators are more likely to apply relatively coherent standards when assessing candidates. Conversely, when job criteria remain abstract or loosely specified, perceptions of fit may vary across decision-makers, even when evaluating the same applicant.

Existing research has examined subjective perceptions of fit (Cable & DeRue, 2002) and the measurement of fit across multiple domains (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). However, less attention has been directed toward the stability of the evaluative benchmark itself. In other words, while much of the literature explores how well individuals match predefined roles, fewer studies consider how clearly those roles are defined at the outset. If the benchmark against which candidates are compared lacks precision, variability in recruitment outcomes

may reflect differences in role interpretation rather than differences in candidate capability alone. From this perspective, strengthening clarity in job articulation may contribute to more consistent P–J fit judgments by stabilizing the reference point central to the comparison process.

### **HR Formalization and Job Description Standardization in SMEs**

Small and medium-sized enterprises are often characterized by relatively informal and evolving human resource practices. Cardon and Stevens (2004) noted that HR activities in small firms tend to develop reactively as organizations grow, rather than through systematically designed systems from the outset. Similarly, Kotey and Slade (2005) observed that formal HR practices in small firms vary considerably depending on organizational size and stage of development. These studies suggest that HR structures in SMEs are often shaped by practical necessity and resource constraints, rather than by standardized institutional models.

Within this context, recruitment processes, including the drafting of job descriptions may rely heavily on managerial discretion. Nguyen and Bryant (2004), in their examination of HR practices in SMEs, found that lower levels of formalization were common in smaller firms, particularly where administrative resources were limited. Formalization, in this sense, refers not merely to bureaucratic expansion, but to the establishment of consistent procedures and documented standards that guide decision-making.

Job description standardization can be understood as a focused form of HR formalization. Rather than introducing complex systems, it involves clarifying role boundaries and competency expectations in a structured and consistent manner. Clearly articulated criteria may help reduce interpretive variation among hiring managers by providing shared reference points during recruitment discussions. At the same time, the literature does not suggest that formalization alone guarantees improved outcomes. Instead, it indicates that the degree of clarity and consistency embedded in HR processes may influence how organizational decisions are formed.

Taken together, research on SME HR practices highlights an important contextual condition: where formal structures are limited, ambiguity in role articulation may be more likely to emerge. This makes SMEs a particularly relevant setting for examining how greater structural clarity in job descriptions might shape recruitment judgment processes.

### **Research Gap and Theoretical Positioning**

The preceding review highlights three relevant strands of literature. Research on role ambiguity demonstrates the importance of clearly defined expectations for employee outcomes. Studies on person–job fit emphasize the alignment between individual characteristics and job demands as a central consideration in recruitment. Work on HR formalization in SMEs illustrates how structural clarity and procedural consistency vary across organizational contexts, particularly in smaller firms with limited formal systems. Although these perspectives offer valuable insights, they are often examined independently.

What remains less explored is how the clarity of job articulation influences recruitment judgment at the point of selection. Much of the recruitment literature concentrates on assessment tools, interviewer bias, or applicant characteristics, implicitly assuming that the job benchmark against which candidates are evaluated is stable and well specified. However, if the articulation of competency requirements is itself ambiguous, inconsistencies in hiring decisions may stem not only from evaluator subjectivity or candidate variability, but also from instability embedded in role definition.

This study addresses this gap by examining job description standardization as a structural intervention within an SME context. Rather than treating recruitment accuracy solely as an outcome of assessment techniques, the research considers the clarity of competency articulation as a foundational condition shaping evaluative stability. By situating hiring accuracy at the level of perceived judgment precision, the study offers a process-oriented perspective that connects role articulation, fit evaluation, and HR structural development in smaller firms. In doing so, it contributes to a more integrated understanding of how recruitment judgments are formed under conditions of varying structural clarity.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopted an action research approach to examine how the structure of competency articulation influences recruitment judgment processes within a real organizational setting. Action research was selected because issues surrounding job definition are not purely technical adjustments to written documents. Rather, they are embedded in ongoing communication, interpretation, and coordination among organizational members. The collaborative orientation of action research made it possible to work alongside practitioners while observing how structural adjustments affected decision-making in practice.

The research unfolded in three broad stages. The first stage involved diagnosis. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were conducted to identify inconsistencies and ambiguities in how job competencies were described. The second stage centered on collaborative intervention design. Led by the human resources department, a draft job description template was discussed and revised through internal meetings involving the administrative unit and members of the management team. The third stage focused on implementation and observation. The standardized framework was applied to selected positions, and subsequent recruitment discussions were examined to understand whether and how judgment processes became more structured.

Although action research often involves multiple iterative cycles, this study did not pursue several full rounds of intervention. Instead, it concentrated on one structured intervention while maintaining continuous observation and reflection throughout the process. The researcher adopted a reflexive stance and approached interpretations of change with caution, avoiding direct attribution of short-term adjustments to broader structural transformation.

### Research Context

The study was conducted in a cross-border e-commerce SME located in China, employing close to 30 staff members. The company operates with a formalized human resources department responsible for routine recruitment and personnel management. However, given the relatively small size of the HR team, recruitment responsibilities are not handled exclusively within that unit. In practice, line managers are actively involved in defining job requirements and participating in candidate evaluation. This shared structure means that recruitment decisions rely on cross-departmental coordination, which can make consistency in competency articulation more difficult to maintain.

The company's core positions include operations roles, finance roles, customer service roles, and marketing roles. Operations staff oversee daily platform management, data monitoring, and compliance with marketplace rules. Finance personnel manage accounting records and cost control. Customer service staff handle cross-border client communication and after-sales issues. Marketing roles focus on online promotion strategies, advertising management, and brand-related content operations. Although written job descriptions exist for

these positions, their structure and level of detail vary. Competency requirements are often expressed in broad or generalized terms rather than through clearly defined behavioral indicators.

During interviews, several managers acknowledged that specifying core competencies in concrete terms during recruitment can be challenging. In some cases, requirements remain centered on formal criteria such as educational background or years of experience, with less emphasis on situational performance expectations. While the organization is not devoid of HR procedures, variation in how roles are articulated provides a relevant setting for examining how structural clarity may influence recruitment judgment processes.

### **Intervention**

The intervention focused on developing a structured job description template aimed at improving clarity and consistency in competency articulation. The framework was not produced solely by the researcher. Instead, it emerged through an internal collaborative process involving multiple organizational actors.

The process began with the human resources department preparing an initial draft based on existing job descriptions. This draft consolidated common elements such as role purpose, key responsibilities, and general competency requirements. The draft was then brought to internal meetings organized by the administrative unit, where each section was reviewed and discussed in detail. Particular attention was given to whether competency statements were sufficiently specific and operational.

Following these discussions, revisions were made to reflect the feedback received. The revised version was subsequently submitted to the management team for review. At this stage, discussions centered on whether role boundaries were appropriately defined and whether competency standards aligned with actual business demands. Additional adjustments were made based on managerial input. In total, the template development involved four discussion meetings and three rounds of systematic revision before a unified structure was finalized.

Instead of independently revising individual job descriptions, the organization adopted a single structural framework intended to be applied across different roles. The final template consisted of five components: a concise statement of role purpose, a list of key responsibilities, clearly defined knowledge and skill requirements, behavioral indicators where applicable, and brief notes linking competencies to interview focus areas.

The objective of the intervention was not to formalize every task in rigid detail. Instead, it aimed to provide a more stable reference structure for recruitment discussions, thereby reducing interpretive variation in how competencies were understood and evaluated.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, internal document review, and observation of recruitment-related discussions. During the diagnostic stage, individual interviews with key organizational members served as the primary source of data.

A total of eight participants were interviewed: the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the HR manager, the finance manager, the operations manager, the marketing manager, the customer service manager, and two frontline employees (one customer service specialist and one operations assistant). Participants were selected to reflect different hierarchical levels and functional areas involved in recruitment and day-to-day operations.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The total recording time exceeded six hours. All interviews

were conducted on-site at the company premises. With participants' consent, conversations were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Interview questions focused on three broad areas: how job requirements were defined and communicated, how candidate competencies were evaluated during recruitment, and whether discrepancies existed between formal job descriptions and actual work demands. To complement interview accounts, pre-intervention job descriptions and selected recruitment-related documents were reviewed to understand how competency requirements were formally articulated.

During the implementation stage, recruitment discussions were also observed, with particular attention to how the standardized template was referenced in practice. Rather than analyzing each data source separately, interview transcripts, documents, and observational notes were considered together to develop a contextualized understanding of recruitment judgment processes.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). All transcripts were imported into NVivo qualitative analysis software to facilitate systematic coding and organization of themes. The analysis was guided by the research questions rather than predetermined coding categories.

In the first phase, attention was directed toward identifying patterns related to ambiguity in competency articulation. Open coding was used to capture instances in which participants described unclear expectations, inconsistent interpretations of role requirements, or reliance on generalized criteria during recruitment. Coding at this stage remained flexible, allowing themes to emerge gradually through repeated engagement with the data.

In the second phase, coded material was reviewed comparatively across organizational levels. Interview accounts from managers and frontline employees were examined alongside one another to determine whether similar concerns appeared across positions. When comparable issues were expressed at multiple levels, they were interpreted as structural rather than individual in nature.

NVivo served primarily as an organizational tool for managing coded segments and exploring relationships among themes. Interpretive decisions, however, were grounded in close reading of the transcripts and consideration of the broader organizational context. Themes were refined iteratively to ensure internal coherence and conceptual clarity. Documentary materials were revisited during analysis to compare formal competency descriptions with participants' understandings.

The analysis did not rely on frequency counts or statistical aggregation. Instead, it focused on identifying structural patterns that shaped recruitment judgment processes. This approach aligns with the interpretive orientation of the study and its emphasis on understanding how evaluative stability is formed in context.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Structural Ambiguities in Competency Definition**

Findings from the diagnostic phase suggest that inconsistencies in hiring judgments were not solely related to differences in candidate capability. Rather, they were closely associated with how job competencies were articulated prior to recruitment. Although formal job descriptions existed for most positions, the level of

specificity varied. Core responsibilities and competency expectations were frequently expressed in general terms, with limited clarification regarding observable behaviors or situational demands.

Across managerial interviews, several participants noted that recruitment requests often emphasized formal criteria such as educational background or years of experience. However, the translation of these criteria into concrete performance expectations was less clearly articulated. In some cases, competency descriptions relied on broad attributes such as “strong communication skills” or “familiarity with platform operations” without further elaboration on how these attributes should manifest in practice.

This pattern appeared across multiple departments. Within operations recruitment, prior experience tended to be emphasized, yet distinctions between general e-commerce experience and platform-specific operational expertise were not always clearly defined. Customer service roles showed a similar pattern, where cross-border responsibilities were at times described in ways that resembled domestic service functions, without clearly specifying requirements related to compliance rules or language use. Marketing positions reflected comparable tendencies, with strategic capability frequently highlighted but not consistently translated into task-level expectations.

Frontline employees also reflected on how recruitment discussions sometimes focused on surface-level qualifications rather than situational performance scenarios. One participant described interviews that centered primarily on conversational ability, with limited use of case-based or scenario-oriented questioning aligned with daily operational challenges. As a result, mismatches between expectations and actual work demands occasionally became evident only after onboarding.

Taken together, the data indicate that ambiguity was not confined to isolated job descriptions but embedded in the broader process through which roles were articulated and interpreted. In the absence of clearly defined behavioral indicators and contextual anchors, recruitment judgments tended to rely on individualized interpretations rather than shared evaluative criteria.

This suggests that variability in hiring decisions was not simply a function of candidate differences, but also reflected instability in the reference framework used for evaluation. In this sense, role ambiguity operated as a structural condition shaping how judgments were formed, rather than merely as an outcome experienced after organizational entry.

### **Perceived Changes in the Stability of Recruitment Judgments**

Data collected after the intervention suggest that the introduction of the standardized job description framework did not alter assessment tools or decision authority. Rather, the primary change lay in how competencies were articulated. Compared with the pre-intervention documents, revised job descriptions provided clearer delineation of role expectations, operational contexts, and behavioral indicators. For instance, requirements previously summarized as “strong communication skills” were reformulated into more task-linked descriptions specifying how cross-border customer inquiries should be handled, how platform rules should be addressed in responses, and how atypical order situations should be managed. Such revisions strengthened the connection between competency statements and everyday work scenarios.

Participants consistently described recruitment discussions as becoming more structured following the intervention. Prior to the introduction of the standardized framework, evaluations often relied on loosely defined criteria, and differences in interpretation among decision-makers were relatively common. After the framework was implemented, interview discussions appeared more frequently anchored to predefined competency elements, reducing the need for ad hoc clarification during evaluation.

Although these observations are based on participant accounts rather than formal measurement, similar patterns were reported across multiple interviews. Several managers indicated that disagreements during candidate evaluation occurred less frequently than before, as competency requirements were more clearly articulated and consistently referenced.

Overall, the findings suggest that enhanced clarity in competency articulation contributed to greater coherence and interpretability in recruitment judgments. Rather than yielding measurable quantitative improvements, the impact was reflected in the stabilisation and structuring of the evaluation process itself.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Theoretical Implications**

This study extends existing discussions of role ambiguity and person–job fit by shifting attention to the recruitment stage. Prior research has primarily examined ambiguity as an experience occurring after organizational entry. The present findings suggest that ambiguity may emerge earlier, at the point where job competencies are defined. When competency articulation lacks behavioral specificity, recruitment judgments may rely on unstable evaluative benchmarks, even before employees formally assume their roles.

The study also contributes to person–job fit research by highlighting the structural conditions underlying fit assessment. While the literature commonly focuses on the alignment between applicant characteristics and job demands, less attention has been paid to how clearly those demands are articulated. The findings indicate that variability in hiring judgments may reflect differences in role interpretation as much as differences in candidate capability.

Rather than positioning hiring accuracy solely as an outcome reflected in post-entry performance, this study reframes it as a process-level phenomenon rooted in the stability of evaluative benchmarks. The findings suggest that inconsistencies in recruitment decisions may originate not only from evaluator subjectivity or candidate variability, but from instability embedded in how roles are defined prior to selection.

By highlighting competency articulation as a structural condition shaping judgment formation, the study offers a more process-oriented perspective that connects role clarity, person–job fit, and HR formalization in SMEs.

### **Practical Implications**

For practitioners in small and medium-sized enterprises, the findings suggest that improving recruitment consistency does not necessarily require complex assessment technologies or expanded selection systems. Greater attention to how competencies are defined prior to recruitment may itself enhance evaluative stability.

Developing a structured job description framework can provide a shared reference point for managers involved in hiring. When competency expectations are articulated in task-linked and behaviorally grounded terms, recruitment discussions are less dependent on individual interpretation. In smaller firms where HR resources are limited and decision-making is distributed across departments, such structural clarification may represent a relatively accessible intervention.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study is based on a single SME case, which limits the scope for generalization across industries or organizational contexts. In addition, hiring accuracy was examined as perceived evaluative stability rather than

through formal quantitative indicators such as performance or retention outcomes. While this aligns with the study's interpretive and process-oriented focus, it also represents a limitation in terms of empirical measurement.

Further studies could also examine how structural clarification interacts with other HR development processes in growing SMEs. Longitudinal research across multiple intervention cycles may provide additional insight into how recruitment structures evolve over time.

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