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## Attracting talents in startups: Discourses of seduction

*Atração de pessoas nas startups: Discursos de sedução*

*Atracción de personal en las startups: Discursos de seducción*

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### ABSTRACT

Our research aim is to analyze the persuasion strategies used by startups to attract potential talents. In order to meet this goal, we selected eight startups through convenience sampling; the interviewees are responsible for the Personnel Management of these companies. The research corpus was analyzed through a discourse analysis approach. The research findings indicate seven strategies of persuasion in the recruiting process, which indicate a few discursive oppositions: we versus them, social media and employer branding, the pop management trend, diversity discourse, flexibility, relaxed working environment, and growth discourse. All these themes emerge as persuasion and seduction strategies that turn organizational discourse into a more subtle and engaging speech. Startups explicitly establish interdiscursive relationships with the capitalist discourse.

**Keywords:** startups; attracting talent; retaining talent; recruitment process; discursive strategies.

### RESUMO

Este estudo teve como objetivo analisar estratégias de persuasão das *startups* para seduzir e atrair potenciais candidatos. Foram selecionadas oito *startups* por acessibilidade, entrevistados os responsáveis pela Gestão de Pessoas destas. O corpus da pesquisa foi analisado pela Análise do Discurso. Os resultados apontaram para sete estratégias de persuasão no recrutamento, que são as oposições nós versus eles, as redes sociais e o *employer branding*, os modismos do *pop management*, a diversidade como discurso, a flexibilidade, o ambiente descontraído e o discurso do crescimento. Todos estes temas aparecem como estratégias de persuasão e sedução que torna o discurso organizacional sutil e envolvente. As *startups* estabelecem implicitamente relações interdiscursivas com o discurso capitalista.

**Palavras-chave:** startups; atração de talentos; retenção de talentos; processos seletivos; estratégias discursivas.

### RESUMEN

Este artículo tuvo como objetivo analizar las estrategias de persuasión utilizadas por las startups para seducir y atraer candidatos potenciales. Fueron seleccionadas ocho startups debido a la accesibilidad y se entrevistó a los responsables por la Gestión de Personas. El corpus de investigación fue analizado mediante la Análisis del Discurso. Los resultados mostraron siete estrategias de persuasión en el reclutamiento, que son las oposiciones en el discurso: nosotros versus ellos, redes sociales y el *employer branding*, las modas del *pop management*, la diversidad como discurso, la flexibilidad, el ambiente relajado y el discurso del crecimiento. Todos se presentaron como estrategias que hacen el discurso organizacional sutil y atractivo. Las startups establecen relaciones implícitas y interdiscursivas con el discurso capitalista.

**Palabras clave:** startups; atracción de talentos; retención de talentos; procesos de selección; estrategias discursivas.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The relationship between organizations and individuals may present different meanings; for instance, through organizations individuals dream, design projects, and believe they can carry them out – on the other hand, through individuals, organizations achieve efficiency and effectiveness goals to maximize results progressively (Andrade, 2011). Thus, considering these affective and economic relationship between individuals and organizations, it is possible to realize that such connection is constituted of power relations and creation and dissemination of several organizational discourses (Siqueira, 2006).

Organizational discourses are seen as communication practices that aim at reaching out to the way of thinking and acting of the people that work or that intend to work in a determined organization (Siqueira, 2006). These discourses are displayed in a captivating and subtle way to seduce individuals, aiming to persuade them to accept what is being communicated (Enriquez, 2003; Fiorin, 2013). In such context, seduction, which underlies the discourse, can be understood as something that was not said, but belongs to the discourse; it is, therefore, up to the interlocutor to figure it out and interpret it (Vieira, 2014).

The seduction that is part of organizational discourses is often present in modern organizations, such as startups. Even though there is no consensus regarding the definition of a startup company (Bortolini, Cortimiglia, Danilevicz & Ghezzi, 2018), one finds a few common characteristics among them: lean processes, scalable and repeatable business models, and launch of innovative products or services in the market (Blank, 2013, Oliveira & Zotes, 2018). According to Oliveira (2017), startup companies became a dream for young individuals entering the labor market. The discourses of these companies emphasize a few beliefs, such as flexible working hours, better access to major managers, more autonomy in the decision-making, and growth perspective (Marra, Faria, Oliveira & Almeida, 2019).

Considering such context, the aim of this study is to understand the persuasion strategies used by startups to persuade and attract talents in recruitment processes. Such strategies were investigated in eight startups located in Belo Horizonte metropolitan area, Brazil, based on the opinions of the individuals responsible for the Personnel Management area of these companies. We consider these professionals the main responsible individuals for the creation and reproduction of persuasion strategies in organizational discourses (Watson, 2009).

This research is relevant because it highlights the mostly used strategies by startups while promoting a discussion in the Personnel Management field regarding such strategies. A research in SPELL (Scientific Periodicals Electronic Library) and Scielo (Scientific Electronic Library Online) database carried out in June 2020 indicated the

absence of national articles that incorporated concomitantly the keywords “startups”, “Personnel Management”, “attraction”, and “recruiting process”. Such gap in literature was previously mentioned by Demo, Fogaça and Costa (2018), who emphasized the urgency to conduct further research on recruitment and selection policies. At the international level, Ployhard, Schmitt and Tippins (2017) also affirmed that, despite the significant changes occurring in recruitment processes, research on the theme appears to have diminished over the years, and it is important to pick up on the number of research publications. Specifically regarding startups, national studies are more focused on their management and creation (Rocha, Olave & Ordones, 2019; Maffia et al., 2018, Pinochet, Souza, Lopes & Bueno., 2018), and evaluation of financial performance (Oliveira & Zotes, 2018; Miranda, Santos & Dias, 2016).

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand the discursive strategies of startups to attract talents, the literature review carried out herein bases on three main pillars: Startups as modern organizations; discourse and the process of organizational persuasion; and recruiting and attracting talents.

### 2.1 Startups as modern organizations

The revolution provided by technology changed several productive processes, business models, and commercial activities and restructured labor relations, which shape modern companies (Andrade, 2011; Faria, 2009; Siqueira, 2006). As result of such revolution, the great technological development led to a world in which information and technology – especially informatics – exercise power and influence on people’s and companies’ lives (Siqueira, 2004).

Modern companies, therefore, underwent transformations in productive instruments, because the role played by science and technique at every level of production got even bigger. According to Pagès, Bonetti, Gaulejac and Descendre (1993), hyper-modern companies – which in line with Enriquez (1997), Faria (2009) and Siqueira (2006) correspond to modern companies – in Personnel Management processes are characterized by the intensified elaboration of mediation processes. Thus, companies aim at providing a deeper connection to the organization through the management of affective and psychological aspects of the individual, with a certain mediation between exploration and domination actions, offering advantages and benefits.

Startups can be considered an example of modern companies as they develop processes focused on technology and make use of mediation processes and management of affective aspects. Normally, startups enter the market with lean production processes, which tend to improve as the idea of product or service is validated (Blank, 2013). Accordingly, a common practice within these companies is the organization-oriented innovation culture

and professional development; then, young professionals and inviting workplaces are characteristics of these disruptive businesses (Oliveira, 2017).

By focusing on the relationship between the modern company and the individual, Pagès et al. (1993) affirm that organizations are constantly looking for the support of its communication strategies aiming at professional fulfillment, meeting individuals' wishes. This way, communication is created through organizational discourses that aim to establish an affectionate relationship between the company and current and future employees; winning the hearts of employees entails acknowledgement and consideration.

## 2.2 Discourses and organizational seduction

Human resource policies and practices aim at stimulating people's adhesion to organizational values and objectives. Therefore, they make use of persuasion so that corporate objectives are incorporated through organizational discourse (Andrade, 2011, Siqueira, 2004). A discourse, according to Fiorin (1998), is an aggregation of contents whose objective is the interpretation of the world. In addition, in line with Vieira (2014), a discourse can be consolidated when making strategic use of several communication elements, revealing the ideal target point.

For Siqueira (2006), the process of organizational seduction is powerful, since it involves micro actions carefully planned to accomplish individuals' wishes and generate the sense of the accomplishment they desire; such process makes individuals think that the organization is the one responsible for providing such accomplishments. From this perspective and in accordance with Vieira (2014), seduction is part of the discourse because a few senses are implied through persuasion strategies, which are to be found between the lines in the implicit part of the discourse. In this sense, Enriquez (1997) argues that the art of seduction is one of the main persuasion strategies used by modern companies to attract talents to the organization. In this process, the effective communication is rooted in the message that the organization shares with its employees, emphasizing that they provide the best place to work.

Souza and Carrieri (2014) affirm that there are strategies that are part of the discursive persuasion, such as the use of semantics and syntax, word choice, and narrative. Regarding discursive semantics and syntax, Fiorin (1998) defines semantics as the representation of unconscious assumptions which refers to a social construction; syntax is defined as the space of conscious domain in which the speaker elaborates argumentative strategies.

Discursive strategies also include non-materialized features with hidden mechanisms in the discourse, the so-called silencing. Silencing can manifest when the speaker decides to omit possible senses (Souza & Carrieri, 2014). Silenced practices aim at reaching out to the way of thinking, permeating as seduction strategies. Pagès et al. (1993) argue that implied messages in discourse can lead

individuals to believe that – when embracing the objectives of the organization as if their own and working hard to accomplish them – the organization will repay them through the accomplishment of their individual wishes.

Thus, seduction is to be found in the appearance: an insinuating smile, words carefully chosen, balanced and pleasant sentences; a certain banalization of problems allows the discourse to be adequately pleasant (Enriquez, 1991). The seduction process found in organizational discourses is used to attract the best talent on the market.

## 2.3 Recruitment in organizations: Attracting talents

Considering the more specialized and knowledge-based work developed in organizations, companies aim to attract the best talent with advanced skills and knowledge in recruitment processes (Ployhart, Schmitt & Tippins, 2017; Demo et al., 2018). Thus, recruiting refers to a wide set of activities that attach candidates to organizations and job positions. These candidates can be either active or passive. Active candidates are the ones usually looking for a new job and passive are the ones open to new job opportunities but not on any specific search (Ployhart et al., 2017).

With technological advances, traditional recruiting practices underwent several changes. First, in the 1990s with the Internet, and more recently with social media (Ployhart et al., 2017; Demo et al., 2018). Most organizations use the Internet with recruiting purposes (for example, career pages on company websites) in addition to social media (e.g., Instagram and LinkedIn) (Mulvey, 2013).

One of the most used strategies in the attraction process is employer branding. Ambler and Barrow (1996) defined employer branding as the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment and associated with the hiring organization. In employer branding, the employer emphasizes its values, exposes the company's differentiating features in the market, and affirms that what is being offered to employees is unique and valuable (Lacombe & Reis, 2016). This way, the employer ends up announcing functional, personal development, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employing brand (Dabirian, Paschen & Kietzmann, 2019). Such strategy can be defined as "the sum of the company's effort to manage and balance the perception of employees that it is the best place to work" (Itam, Misra & Anjum, 2020, p. 675). This is even more important for modern organizations, which face increasing competition, to attract and retain employees with specialized abilities and knowledge (Russell & Brannan, 2016), such as startups. After all, companies aiming at attracting best talents make use of diffusion of values for candidates through their own employees' behavior and communication in social media (Lacombe & Reis, 2016; Russell & Brannan, 2016; Oltramari, Cordova & Tonelli, 2019).

Having a significant and visible employer branding determines the capacity to attract and inspire talents with the appropriate profile demanded by the organization,

gaining competitive advantage (Itam et al., 2020). As Russel and Brannan (2016) affirm, employer branding is a strategy used to attract talents because the recruiting process is based on several methods to encourage the adjustment of the candidate and align his/her personal values with those of the organization, before and after hiring. Among these methods, we emphasize the ones highlighted by Souza, Lemos, Cavazotte, and Malva (2015), namely the promise of accelerated growth, continuous training, and meritocracy.

Concomitantly with current discussions on employer branding, we observe the emergence of employee value. Employee value does not only include economic and organizational values in employer branding, but also verifies what is important and meaningful for employees (Karnes, 2009). In line with this perspective, the expression “branding” refers to the process of value creation between the organization and individuals, i.e., stakeholders (Itam et al., 2020).

Siqueira (2004) also points out a few participatory experiences in which the company presents itself sharing its goals with individuals. In this case, the company shares its corporate interests with the society; in other words, the company emphasizes that individual interests in the society are also represented by the corporation. Another issue indicated by the author is the devotion to excellence, which entails that the company is the bridge to achieve success and individual achievements of employees through effort and commitment in the execution of activities.

The pursue of diversity in the work environment is another method used (Siqueira, 2004). In line with Cox (1993), diversity consists in including social groups with their own characteristics that differ from other groups within a social system, whether because of sexual orientation, ethnicity and race, culture, or other factors. In organizational discourses, according to Siqueira (2004), the inclusion of diversity attracts compromised and diverse individuals, increasing creativity and internal innovation. The author also states, however, that organizations are strongly looking for behavioral uniformity. In the field of information technology in which startups fit, for instance, there is segregation of

women due to the lack of access to this sort of market, given the prejudice they face and deal with in math and logic courses (Lima, 2013).

### 3 METHOD

We carried out herein a qualitative research with a descriptive approach to analyze the persuasion strategies used by startups to attract potential talents. Regarding the data collection procedure, we carried out in-depth interviews guided by a semi-structured script. As defined by Godoi and Mattos (2006), in-depth interviews are a type of interview whose investigation aim constitutes of life experience and individuals’ attitudes and values.

The research population is composed of startups located in Belo Horizonte metropolitan area, Brazil. According to data provided by the state government of Minas Gerais (2018), where the metropolitan area locates, the state of Minas Gerais hosts the second biggest startup hub in Brazil. The convenience sampling method was chosen based on data provided by Startup Base (2019). Thus, according to Gil (2008), the authors selected the organizations they had access to, believing they could somehow represent the population. We selected eight startups and interviewed professionals responsible for Personnel Management working in this position for at least three years. The number of organizations analyzed was outlined based on data saturation, which is to be understood as the situation in which new information is no longer relevant nor bring new implications to the object studied because every issue, concept, and theory are already enough for the analysis (Creswell, 2007). Both startups and respondents were alphabetically codified with fictitious names to preserve their anonymity (Table 1). Regarding the profile of the companies, they have been active in the market – on average – for seven years and three months; the largest one (G) has 319 employees; the smallest (E), 17. The number of employees and the sector in which these companies operate are also diversified, as pointed out in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Profile of the startups analyzed

Startup	Personnel Manager	Sector	Company age	Number of employees
A	Alena	Aviation	7 years	220
B	Benício	Digital market	9 years	260
C	Cléo	Technological development	8 years	160
D	Dania	Personnel management consulting	4 years	30
E	Eunice	Relationship marketing	8 years	17
F	Frida	Technological development	8 years	144
G	Gabriela	Digital solutions for personnel management	9 years	319
H	Hosana	IT managed services	5 years	195

Source: Research data.

The analytical strategy of the data depends on the type of phenomenon researched and the researchers’ ontological and epistemological position. We are in accordance with the assumption of centrality of language, which relates to affirming how the world is like and how the

language establishes and acts on the world, participating in its constitution (Gergen, 1997, 2009; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Language does not reflect impartially our world, our identities, and our social relations (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). In this analytical process, there are political games,

symbolic exchanges, and psychosocial constructions that can be understood through the analysis of persuasion strategies. According to such line of thought, the corpus of our research was analyzed according to the French Discourse Analysis. Considering the process of constituting a research corpus, Orlandi (2010) affirms that the discourse analysis focuses on discursive practices of different natures, including image, sound, and letter. In addition, discourse analysis is part of language sciences and aims at investigating, in a reflexive way, the worldview of the speaker involved in the discourse who intends to persuade the interlocutor i.e., the one for whom somebody speaks. This attempt to persuade occurs through discursive strategies developed at the enunciation level (Faria, 2009).

The analysis elements of the enunciation aim to – through analyses and interpretation of verbal and non-verbal productions – realize which are the senses established and what is the intention of the speaker, who expose him/herself through the words chosen to communicate (Faria, 2009). Besides, it is possible to identify a few elements in the analysis: characters (created to stand for or oppose the ideas presented), lexical selection, implicit information (information not clearly written), explicit information, and silencing (Fiorin & Savioli, 1996). In this article, these elements were highlighted in bold in the transcribed statements and will be discussed in the upcoming section. The statements were organized with numbers to facilitate their recognition in the analysis process

#### 4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Considering the semantic path of this article, seven persuasion strategies were identified as the most relevant in the analysis, namely: oppositions in discourse – we versus them, social media and employer branding, trends, diversity discourse, flexibility, relaxed working environment, and growth discourse (career and learning).

##### 4.1 Oppositions in discourse: We versus them

The discourse that initially introduced the practices of Personnel management was created as an opposition movement against traditional companies, allowing interpretations on the adoption of some processes. Such situation was identified in Gabriela's discourse: "(1) traditional companies, they have much more defined processes than startups, they are more bureaucratic, so they have long processes and sometimes more complex".

Statement (1) indicates, initially, an explicit strategy: "we versus them" in which from a startup perspective "them" is understood as traditional and/or non-startup companies. There is a dichotomy between these two characters (traditional and startup companies), who are characterized according to their respective HR practices. Thus, one observes in the explicit discourse that traditional company is the one associated with "much more defined processes", implying a pejorative tone through the use of intensity, especially when associating these processes with the "more

bureaucratic" side of the traditional company.

Cléo also affirms that (2) "sometimes very traditional companies end up losing this *team*, when the process is approved they already moved on, because the process undergoes bureaucratically ten hierarchical spheres until it happens". Hosana complements that "(3) in other companies, everything is slower and bureaucratic".

When considered jointly with others, Statement (2) and (3) bring another connotation to characterize traditional companies, for the lexical selections "more formal", "slower", "bureaucracy", and "series of rules", which indicate disfunctions of bureaucratic structures (Merton, 1970). Regarding the speed with which processes occur, one notices an implied judgment of a more rigid HR structure, which is emphasized through the use of intensity vocabulary when referring to the time it takes to complete a process in traditional companies.

With regard to the difference between traditional companies and startups, Dania states that "(4) the biggest difference is the type of communication because in general the processes are the same but adapted. Communication is more open, which is a bit more strategic, and it is taken into consideration". Meanwhile, Statement (4) indicates the development of an ideological effect for a possible HR advance in technology companies, which corresponds to the character startups. It is worth mentioning that the lexical selection in the statements, such as strategies of comparison and opposition, enables the construction of a startup image based on openness and informality. It is also relevant to mention that the oppositions depict an ideology created through this discourse and are implicitly established (Van Dijk, 2000). Thus, when making use of a figure of speech to compare qualities or actions of elements, one part ends up with a pejorative image so that the other stands out with better qualities.

Another interesting detail is that, in order to break the paradigms of a formal and hierarchical company, Personnel managers of startups attribute to themselves the autonomy to make decisions, implying that there is freedom for innovation. This way, the habit of changes, decisions, and innovation would be relevant issues appreciated by the talents to be attracted. Frida affirms that (5) "the main difference is that traditional companies do not have as much freedom as startups to innovate and the traditional company does not allow you to". Eunice states that there is (6) "an active participation in every stage of the process. I get to know everything that is going on in each sector, so it is easy to see the movement and observe each one". Likewise, another interviewee states that:

(7) an HR completely more strategic, it was sort of a support HR, and it gradually became more strategic in every environment of the company, so today HR is at the heart of everything, based on metrics. It is based on HR that the company plans everything, so today HR plays a different role, it is completely strategic. (Cléo)

The character interpreted by the traditional company in Statement (5) is characterized by bureaucratic processes according to the expression "do not have as much freedom",

which implies the idea of a prison, whereas startups work on processes that enable more freedom whether to innovate or create. Regarding Statement (6), by making use of the lexical selection “know everything that is going on in each sector” indicates a new discursive dominance through “movement and observation”, which shows that HR operations are processual, functional, and based on “metrics”, just like any other sector. When characterizing the startup, elements that refer to workers’ freedom are initially used, but in daily practice there is an implicit existence of control and action planning among the members of the organization (Enriquez, 1997, Pagès et al., 1993), indicating a discursive contradiction. However, in addition to control, there is a concern for modern companies to oppose the already institutionalized social control of bureaucratic companies, since this structure established in traditional companies is perceived as pressure on workers in terms of obligation of methodical, time-consuming, and rule-following behaviors (Merton, 1970).

Thus, we realized that when the discourse is focused on startups, HR is instantly seen as a “strategic partner” of the business and that it becomes “strategic in everything”; from such perspective, however, HR is closely related to the measurement of the efforts perceived in the results presented by employees (Enriquez, 1997, Siqueira, 2004), which is analyzed “based on metrics”. Therefore, the fragments of such persuasion strategy reinforce the concept of modern companies presented by Pagès et al. (1993), who sustain the existence of good economic results by creating discourses that brings perceptions of innovation and freedom, despite disguised as subtle ideologies that facilitate the control over workers.

#### 4.2 Social media and employer branding

The process of attracting talents in startups begins with the announcement of job opening on social media. Such diffusion of job openings, in every case analyzed here in, are carried out online through social media, such as LinkedIn, Instagram, corporate website, and personalized platforms, which corroborates the research of Ployhart et al. (2017), Mulvey (2013), and Marra et al. (2019). The use of social media is, then, a strong ally to find and captivate potential candidates.

(8) You have this eye-catching photo of the company area that is modern and cool, this is a different way to draw candidates’ attention, it makes all the difference to attract the best talents according to the job advertising we make. (Gabriela)

It is possible to notice in Statement (8) an explicit need of the company to demonstrate the positive experiences from “a different way to draw candidates’ attention” through the repeated use of terms referring to parties and promotion of corporate area, indicating the use of hospitality in the discourse (Lacombe & Reis, 2016). We observe that this discourse is created to captivate and, consequently, enhance the possibility to draw the attention of the best talent, in addition to making the company desired by those who see it, as a showcase (Siqueira, 2006).

(9) We are just really active on LinkedIn, not only on company’s profile, but also on collaborators’, so we encourage collaborators to talk about the company, to promote, to share, so our collaborators are very active. (Gabriela)

The practice of promoting the company by the employee is an “encouragement” created by the managers themselves, as reported by Gabriela (9), which leads employees to post their own experiences within the organization on their social media. What is implied in such discourse is that for employees to generate a positive impact on the company, it is necessary to reach out to their emotional involvement to make them “help the brand” in promoting the organization; thus, these individuals work both as internal and external employees, as brand promoters (Dabirian et al., 2019. Oltramari et al., 2019).

(10) Because endomarketing triggers organic employer branding, which means the situation where the own employees promote the company through social media posts, so everybody posts a lot of stuff that happens here, they make posts about their daily routine, about things that are happening. (Dania)

Benício adds that (11) “we post stories, we want to comment on stories, because it is a living thing and we are not compelled to do it, we do it organically”. Following the same line of reasoning, Statements (10) and (11) present the ideology that there is no division between public and private, which makes room for posting “about their daily routine, about things that are happening” and ends up allowing managers to make strategic use of these practices. Even though social media is normally related to leisure and personal opinions, companies explicitly introduce a new subjectivity, in which the adhesion of workers occurs as if they were the owners of their own company and had to work for it (Vieira, 2014). It is possible to notice, therefore, that in this sort of management, the employee’s life is doubly managed in an “organic” way. After all, in addition to the control already exerted by companies and other institutions that permeate individuals’ life, employees are also submitted to an entrepreneurial self-management, which reduces the other spheres of life by giving place to administrative logics and ends up promoting the reduction of privacy (Andrade, 2011).

(12) I consider that employer branding means that we work on the branding of the company to attract new talents. It only shows the benefits so that we can attract them and say that the company is an amazing place to work. (Alena)

Statement (12) demonstrates how Alena clearly emphasizes that the “employer branding” authorizes and optimizes the company’s ability to reach out to potential talents, in case they are looking for “an amazing place to work”. Implicitly, it is as if the company made an interdiscourse with “brand hunters”, i.e., individuals searching for jobs who want to work for a company with an employer branding that highlights the organization’s image (Oltramari et al., 2019). Thus, in addition to gain and to their increasing visibility in the market where it operates, the organization ends up becoming a differentiated company in society – especially for potential talents –, increasing its competitiveness in recruiting processes, and turning into a

more desirable place to work.

### 4.3 Trends and pop management

Management culture, which refers to the content produced by business-media management and carries the ideology that predicts the recipe for success, was adopted as an ideology in the entrepreneurial sphere, since it is part of a capitalist discourse. Therefore, several expressions from pop-management could be found in the analysis, such as the frequent use of the terms: techrecruiter, partner, employer branding, endomarketing, soft skills, meetups, and onboarding. Such culture is permeated by recurrent patterns, which become part of the vocabulary used by professionals working in the field of Personnel Management and help to popularize and legitimize the management culture (Wood & Paes de Paula, 2006).

Frida reports that (13) “basically 99% of the companies that do things similar to what we do, do the same thing. It is very complicated, even trying to innovate in this environment”. Dania also adds that:

(14) There are several things we see as a little ladder, every startup does it like this [...]HR business partner became a trend in the startup world, it means nothing more than traditional RH processes reinvented and adapted to a different reality. It is nothing more than an HR consultant, which is precisely the way they are called in traditional companies, in startups it is a business partner. (Dania)

Considering Statements (13) and (14) and the historical construction of Personnel Management in Brazil and in the world until the present moment, one notices the emergence of several trends in the area that were implemented in organizations over the years, as according to Frida “traditional RH processes reinvented and adapted to a different reality”. However, the effective organizational needs that occur due to managerial novelties “is nothing more” than a strategy used to modernize a discourse to make it more appealing (Enriquez, 2003, Siqueira, 2004) and to strategically please the receiver. What one perceives is that, due to isomorphism, i.e., the tendency to copy one another, “it is very complicated, even trying to innovate in this environment”, considering that all startups “do the same thing”; in other words, follow the same trends.

Many of these trends, which are often incorporated into discourses, do not serve to solve organizational problems because, in practice, they are nothing but “reinvented and adapted”. In this sense, when Dania states that “HR business partner [...] is nothing more than an HR consultant”, the discourse presents an implicit assumption that declares the strategies to modernize processes, although still in a rationalizing movement.

### 4.4 Diversity as discourse

Statements (15) and (16) bring a new explicit persuasion strategy: diversity. With such strategy, it is possible to realize the search for diversification of the workforce, which is in agreement with Cox’s (1993) perspective regarding the political use of diversity.

(15) Generally, in all areas diversity is present, we have been raising the flag for diversity, so the main competencies we look for in a person is the openness to diversity, an openness to change, an adaptability to greater diversity is one of our pillars because we realized that diversity is one of the reasons that motivates workers. (Hosana)

Hosana (15) explicitly approaches diversity as an essential competency because it provides an alignment with the “pillars of the company”. It is possible to notice that the lexical selection “raising the flag” suggests a struggle associated with diversity; implicitly, we understand that the company aims at understanding differences and breaking down barriers, allowing the access of minorities.

Frida and Alena add to the affirmations made by Hosana saying that (16) “this is a very diverse company in terms of preferences, personalities, styles, religion, everything, so the person must know how to deal with diversity” (Frida). (17) People are attracted by it, by our values, by the flags we raise, for the actions we promote, and so on” (Alena).

Despite mentioned in an implicit way as also in other reports, Statements (16) and (17) allows room for some interpretations. When the company “promotes itself as diverse”, the aim is to demonstrate a more deconstructed image of the company than what is considered standard. Therefore, diversity can be a way to demonstrate that “modern” companies also stand by these “causes”, “raising the flag”.

One character that has gained strength in the statements analyzed is explicitly presented through the term “guy”. Such character emerges explicitly before the gender discrimination so frequent in the area of technology, as noted in Dania’s declaration (18) “I need that senior guy to develop this technology”. It is also possible to notice that the lexical selections used by Eunice – (19) “you gotta go there and get that guy” – are related to socially constructed stereotypes that confirm that a development professional must be a man. In this male dominant scenario, one notices a relevant dichotomy: on the one hand, the company “raises the flag” for diversity and makes use of “the discourse of an open environment” when trying to attract female talents, as reported by Hosana in Statement (20); on the other, male dominance stereotypes in the work environment still prevail. Thus, gender equality is not perceived in the speech because the terms that refer and characterize the male audience permeate the discourses, propagating stereotypes referring to IT professionals, as defended by Lima (2013).

(20) Especially women, because the IT market is still dominated by man, so machismo is still quite present, sexism is very present [...] so when we bring up the diversity issue, reporting channels, I see a sparkle in women’s eyes. When I am interviewing women, I use the discourse of an open environment a lot. (Hosana)

From the above-mentioned statement, it is easy to perceive that the term diversity does not stand by the real inclusion of minorities in companies, considering the declarations implicitly reveal discursive contradictions referring to the intention and application of practices. Still regarding diversity, there was silencing in the speeches

when approaching the lack of room for everybody, specifically the non-place for older people, indicating ageism or age discrimination. The age issue was reported in a few lexical selections – Statements (21) and (22), for instance – because companies are looking for people that fit “a younger profile”, which implies age discrimination due to the age of potential talents, thus not providing the same opportunities to individuals that do not fit such standard, which is in line with the findings of Marraet al.(2019). Eunice and Gabriela affirmed that (21) “they were people that fit the profile, let’s say they corresponded to the age range I was looking for, in this sense” and “yes, people with a younger profile work in startups”.

#### 4.5 Flexibility

The term flexible was one of the most referred to in several senses, as according to Statements (23) and (24); they presented, respectively, flexible working hours, autonomy and flexibility in processes, and flexibility in terms of leisure. In addition, the terms provide positive and appealing processes for potential candidates (Siqueira, 2014; Vieira, 2014). Cléo highlights the importance of (23) “an autonomy to perform the work, a certain flexibility in working hours to accomplish the tasks”.

(24)Flexibility is something everybody wants, an environment that is not so tight, people like to have a more flexible environment, not only regarding working hours, but the guy can have a table tennis table, a pool table: ‘oh, I’m tired, I’m going over there to play some video game, to chill a bit’. (Frida)

However, while the company offers – through its discourse – autonomy as a differential, it requires a “certain flexibility” from the employee. Flexibility herein refers to the quality of being flexible, the ability to bend easily, something that is agile and moves with facility. In Statement (25), the meaning of flexibility goes beyond common knowledge; what one notices in the lexical selection is that “it is not the one people talk about”. What we perceive, then, is a flexibility endowed with other specific characteristics, i.e., implicitly combined and associated with resiliency and responsibility.

(25) In our environment, it is real flexibility, not the one people talk about, because our context is a context that changes rapidly, several variables influence it, flexibility is a very important competence for our professionals. With flexibility comes resiliency, to be able to deal with some situations and not wasting time on frustrations. (Alena)

With regard to the resiliency reported in Statement (25), regardless of the situation the employee must face, he/she cannot “waste time on frustrations”. What one understands is that employees’ work, or some situations that can interfere in it or cause frustrations, are not relevant for the company to spend its time with, evidencing an interdiscourse with euphemistical aspects of organizational persuasion, which may hide workplace violence or suffering in the workplace (Vieira, 2014). Still with this regard, it is possible to understand that flexibility requires everyday resiliency, but the implicit issue is: What needs to be resilient? If the flexibility presented to the candidate was related to the freedom to work a flexible schedule, now it

requires resiliency from the employee before frustrations.

Thus, the individual that claims to be given flexibility to define his own work schedules is the same that must be always responsible, adaptable, and resilient. Frida affirms that she believes (26) “that no matter what happens, the individual must have responsibility, if the individual wants the flexibility that we provide, then the individual must be responsible at work”.

In Statement (26), flexibility relates to another explicit characteristic that ended up becoming a requirement of the company: responsibility, which also implies the intention to achieve high performance in the company. The flexibility used before as an attraction asset seems like a naturalized discourse of the market, but implicitly it shows that there is no room for just anybody, considering that the company “demands a responsible individual”, corroborating the studies of Vieira (2014). Therefore, the employee needs to be resilient the whole time, agile to deal with adversities stemming from the workplace, and adaptable because he/she must be responsible for the situations that emerge in the workspace. This way, the discourse is created based on the adoption of values of the entrepreneurial individual, who becomes more flexible and adaptable to be accepted in an innovative and competitive environment (Davel& Vergara, 2014).

#### 4.6 Relaxed environment

To expose good working conditions, companies especially emphasize the relaxing environment. Hosana, for instance, highlights what she offers at the company: “we have some different things like fruits every day, massage, we really have a more relaxed space, a very horizontal environment, it’s really cool”. Another example is the one given by Benício, who affirms that: “there is videogame, pool table, puffs to use”. In addition, Frida argues that “people can work wearing flipflops, people can work lying on the couch and this the traditional company does not allow you to”, reinforcing the difference between traditional and startup companies.

Another highlight concerns the terms that allude to joy, fun, and parties, which are often used when portraying the internal environment: “Then we receive this money to spend in trimestral integration, so we get paid to throw a party”, according to Benício. In line with the findings by Pabst and Siqueira (2008), Siqueira (2006), and Marraet al.(2019), the startups analyzed herein aim at meeting individuals’ wishes, which involves working at a relaxed and fun place, but ends up being a way to keep employees under control. In this sense, in the statements of Cléo (27) and Benício (28) there are a few denials, such as “it’s not all just parties” and “life is not a bed of roses”, using the discourse to indicate the sacrifices they make for some moments of pleasure: (27) “it’s not all just parties, we can’t party every day, but we do what we can do” (Cléo), and (28) “life is not a bed of roses, right, we work a lot, a lot” (Benício).

In addition, while Cléo uses the expression “we can’t party everything”, she implicitly shows the need of the



individual to meet goals in order to be able to enjoy these benefits. What is even more implicit is the fact that the whole process is, as a matter of fact, a strategy. After all, as the company has as central pillar of organizational activities the result-driven orientation, one can say that this method is used to push the employee to work even harder to meet the goals established by the company, as reported and confirmed by Benício – “we work a lot, a lot” –, Alena – who has “strict rules concerning employees”, or Gabriela, Frida, and Hosana when mentioning the “high goals that one must achieve”.

#### 4.7 Discourse of growth (career and learning)

Another persuasion strategy used refers to constant learning and personal development with which the company may provide the candidate. Thus, it is possible to confirm some findings from organizational discourses related to the promise of accelerated growth and continuous learning through investments in training (Souza et al., 2015). Subsequently, considering Statement (29), the concern of RH about the individual career development of the employee is implied, whether through courses that leverage the career or through the provision of access for the employee to improve his/her career, which corroborates the findings presented by Marra et al. (2019).

(29) A lot of concern about development, we are very concerned about their career, so we invest a lot in it, we pay for online courses, which is one of the main benefits, there are online platforms for courses, and there are several other platforms that can be used to pursue knowledge. (Gabriela)

What is implied in the above-transcribed declaration is the benevolence of the organization when making such investments. To foster individual development and provide trainings is an attractive and common practice of organizations, which intend to demonstrate that the company is constantly investing in the career of employees. When making use of discourses that aim at attracting potential candidates and presenting the company as an organization that shares the objectives of employees, it becomes clear that the company turns its managerial interests to the community. In other words, the company supports the individual interests of employees; it does not present itself as an organization with nothing but economic and capitalist goals (Siqueira, 2006). It is also possible to highlight the constant demand for learning, according to the declarations of Eunice and Benício. Eunice cites as the most important characteristics of the candidate (30) “proactivity, ability to learn, for the person to think faster”. Benício adds that:

(31) learn something new every day, teach to evolve. Because the company is very dynamic, it has a lot to do with the pursue of technical knowledge and business knowledge and it is not up to people to just settle, a concept may change every day, so we need to be in constant motion. (Benício)

The Statements (30) and (31) indicate that there is an explicit expectation from the organization to pursue knowledge, which end supconstituting as differential. What is implied in the statements are the business gains because

the access of the employee to new knowledge does not benefit only the individual, but the organization as a whole. The lexical selection “it is not up to people to just settle” indicates an implicit interdiscourse of employees being the owners of their own careers because they must demonstrate “proactivity” and must not “settle” (Pabst & Siqueira, 2008, Andrade, 2011). Therefore, the connotation used by companies in their discourses makes individuals believe that the organization relies all its credibility on people (Enriquez, 2003; Siqueira, 2006).

## 5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Our research aim was to emphasize the persuasion strategies used by startups to attract talents; we, therefore, described the recruitment policies of these companies from the perspective of professionals responsible for Personnel Management. To achieve such research goal, we carried out a descriptive and qualitative study and data were collected through in-depth interviews accomplished in eight startups located in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil; subsequently, we made use of Discourse Analysis to examine the data.

As result, we indicated seven persuasion strategies used in recruiting processes. Regarding the strategy we versus them, we observed its adoption was used to give more credibility to the organizational discourse, which strengthens the idea of freedom as opposed to the image of traditional companies, seen as prisons that take away individuals’ liberty and creativity. Regarding social media and employer branding, we highlighted their strong adherence to recruiting processes to create a positive and appealing image to potential candidates. The use of pop-management was adopted by almost every startup we analyzed herein; in practice, however, these trends do not solve organizational problems, since they are reinvented and readapted existing processes.

With reference to diversity, we cross-checked the incentive discourse with the real diversity inside the company, considering that startups do not reach out to minorities. In addition, the discourse involving diversity contradicts itself in several moments, whether when handling the difficulty of women to enter the IT development market or the non-place for older individuals. Flexibility relates to the psychological expectation of the employee to benefit from certain privileges, as long as he/she is resilient, responsible, and achieves high performance. Regarding the relaxed environment, companies tend to expose their best working conditions, but it was possible to realize in several moments that there are a few pre-conditions for the employee to opt for leisure.

About the growth discourse (career and learning), the companies intended to project a positive image by relying its credibility on employees, as if the organizations’ managerial interests were focused on the community, on behalf of benevolence. Yet, we verified that the same company that provides benefits also demands learning and proactivity

from employees.

Despite their different didactic classifications, all these strategies are strongly related with one another and reinforce the idea that a startup company is the best organization to work for, in addition to considering it as the holder of innovative processes, which occur in a completely different way in traditional companies. The use of the discursive strategy we versus them helps personnel managers to become more aware of their condition as modern company. To pursue this awareness, it is necessary for managers to perceive the differences in relation to others. When considering the traditional company different, other positive arguments for startups emerge, such as employer branding, diversity, and flexibility; the same way, pop-management trends, employee growth, and learning. However, as demonstrated in our article, the processes are similar, especially because they all lie behind persuasion and seduction strategies, which turns the organizational discourse subtle and captivating.

Considering such scenario, even though organizations make use of leisure, informal environment, autonomy, and flexible work and generate the image of the best place for young professionals to develop their careers to achieve success, we noticed that the motivations related to profitability are not explicit, whether due to strategic issues or management styles. Nevertheless, after the conduction of discourse analysis, we noticed that the companies analyzed implicitly establish interdiscursive relationships with capitalist discourses, whose central pillar is entrepreneurial profitability.

Finally, the aim of our article is limited to the analysis of the discourses used by startup companies in the process of attracting candidates from the perspective of Personnel management professionals. However, we suggest for future studies to dive into the details of this discourse from an employee perspective and to encompass – in addition to attraction strategies – retention strategies. A relevant research agenda in the field of organizational changes includes revisiting recruitment processes and the retention of employees in modern companies – startups or not. We also recommend the accomplishment of studies that utilize different data collection procedures, such as participant observation, to improve the analysis of the discourse of individuals working in startup companies.

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