

**Meritocracy, Education and Occupational Attainment: What Do
Employers Really See as Merit?**

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Abstract

Sociological research consistently demonstrates that in modern industrial societies significant inequalities remain in opportunity chances for members of different social classes. The Merit Selection (MS) hypothesis predicts that the allocation of occupational positions in modern post-industrial societies should be based increasingly on meritocratic principles: 'merit' is defined as IQ plus effort, and educational qualifications are seen to provide a useful proxy measure of these characteristics. However, merit variables can only partially explain the inequalities in chances of access to occupational positions. This paper is an attempt to find out what employers are really looking for when they hire employees, in addition to merit as proxied by educational qualifications. Instead of assuming that IQ and effort, whether in themselves or as mediated through educational qualifications, are the only things of importance to employers, I ask just what other factors are involved in 'merit' as employers define it.

This paper presents results from a content analysis of 955 British newspaper job advertisements. While formal educational qualifications *are* important to employers, other 'non-meritocratic' criteria also have a significant role. Some of these non-meritocratic characteristics may relate more to ascribed characteristics than achieved, and in many cases may be more accessible to particular people or groups in society. Overall, this research suggests that in some cases other types of characteristics may be as important as educational qualifications. This is consistent with recent results that suggest that while there may have been a 'tightening bond' between educational attainment and occupational attainment in the mid twentieth century, the role of education is now, if anything, becoming less important.

Introduction

The move from ascription to achievement as a primary basis of social selection is seen as one of the defining characteristics of modern societies (Blau and Duncan 1967; Parsons and Bales 1956). Industrialisation is predicted to have profound consequences for social structures in modern industrial societies: ascriptive characteristics are deemed irrelevant to the judgement of merit, and are necessarily superseded by achievement criteria designed to allow for the efficient allocation of occupational positions. Modern societies should therefore be characterised by merit selection: merit should be the principal determinant both of an individual's access to education and of their subsequent position within the social division of labour (see Jonsson 1996). According to this influential theory, that of 'Merit Selection' (MS), "...all aspects of individuals' provenance, apart from those that might contribute directly to the merit they can achieve, will be rendered increasingly irrelevant to the selection procedures at work" (Goldthorpe 1996: 262)¹. Thus, in a meritocratic society, ascribed characteristics should be diminishing in importance in the face of an emphasis on achieved characteristics, such as educational qualifications (see Bell 1973). The emphasis on achievement through merit entails a degree of equality of opportunity in the society: ascribed characteristics relating to social background become irrelevant.

If ascriptive criteria are to be superseded by achievement criteria, and occupational positions are to be assigned on the basis of merit, what, then, is to count as 'merit'? In general, the literature tends to divide into two opinions. The first opinion suggests that 'merit' should refer to those qualifications that an individual has achieved – outward demonstrations of inner capacities and skills. Educational qualifications signal appropriateness for a particular role: high qualifications open the doors to high-level, functionally important social roles, and a lack of qualifications leaves the doors closed (Parsons 1951, 1954, 1971). The second definition comes initially from Michael Young's satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958), a classic in sociological treatments of the subject, and where the term 'meritocracy' was first coined. Here, merit is seen not simply as achieved qualifications, but as a measure of the specific inner capacities of individuals. Here, "Intelligence and effort together make up merit ($I + E = M$)" (Young 1958: 94). In Young's meritocracy, the ranking of individuals is done purely on the basis of measures of intelligence and effort: those with the highest scores on these variables will be at the top of the occupational hierarchy, those with the lowest at the bottom. While the two definitions (qualifications or $IQ+Effort$) are clearly different, there has been a tendency in the literature to treat them as functionally equivalent, with educational qualifications being taken to provide a good proxy measure of IQ and effort. However, a confusion has arisen when trying to distinguish between 'achieved' and 'meritocratic' characteristics. Although it would seem appropriate to include all 'achieved' characteristics in our definition of a meritocratic society (we have, after all, characterised the movement to modern industrial society as a move from ascription to achievement), in fact the term 'meritocratic' is used in a very narrow way in the literature: qualifications, or $IQ+Effort$. Therefore, in this paper, I will use a narrow definition of a meritocratic society as a society which allocates occupational positions on the basis of $IQ+Effort$, or qualifications (the 'narrow merit selection hypothesis'). However, I will also use a broader definition of merit, as something which has been achieved (the 'broad merit selection hypothesis'). In this category, I count any characteristic that can be seen as non class-biased and achieved. So, for example,

¹ The Merit Selection hypothesis is usually formulated in terms of *movement* towards greater meritocratic selection (the Increasing Merit Selection hypothesis). In this paper, I will make two assumptions: firstly, that the modern industrial society represents the society envisaged as the end point of this movement, and that secondly, therefore, merit-selection should be predominant. The evidence to be presented here cannot say anything about selection in the past, and instead offers a snapshot of selection in a modern industrial society.

the ability to type would be an achieved competence, but only in terms of the broader merit selection hypothesis, as it is not specifically measured by qualifications or IQ+Effort². Anything which cannot be placed strictly into either of these categories will be called ‘non-meritocratic’, whether or not a reasonable case could be made for construing them as ‘merit-worthy’ in one form or another.

A great deal of empirical sociological research has focussed on how far modern post-industrial society³ does indeed resemble a meritocracy. Research has tended to concentrate on the two main features of a meritocratic society: relative rates of social mobility, and the influence of ‘merit’.

Social mobility research has consistently demonstrated that a strong link exists between an individual's social class origins and their social class destination. Yet, in absolute terms, the relationship between class origins and destinations does appear to be weaker now than it was in the past. There has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of those of all class origins entering higher-level service class occupations, and a decrease in those entering manual employment. However, while absolute measures provide one indication of the degree of social mobility in a society, these rates are highly dependent on changes in the occupational structure. One reason for the increase in the numbers of those of all class origins entering higher-level service class occupations is simply because there has been an expansion of non-manual occupations while manual ones have contracted (Goldthorpe 1987: 59). Relative measures, on the other hand, control for structural differences, and so provide a better measure of the openness of a society. As Blau and Duncan acknowledge, “The influence of social origins on occupational destinations finds expression in the relative, not the absolute, proportion of men with the same origin who end up in a certain occupation...” (1967: 35). When structural effects are controlled for by looking at relative mobility rates, a very different picture from that of absolute rates is obtained. The origin-destination association is almost as strong now as it has been over the past decades, and there appears to be no evidence for suggesting that the level of relative mobility is higher now than it has been in the past. Mobility chances are unequal, and significant inequalities exist between individuals from different social origins. For example, Marshall et al. estimate that the chances of a man of service class origin being found in a service class rather than a working class destination are almost eight times greater than the same chances for a man of working class origin (Marshall et al. 1988, and similar patterns are found in Marshall et al. 1997; Goldthorpe 1987; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). Relative mobility rates have remained generally stable in modern British society, such that a situation approximating constant social fluidity has prevailed (Goldthorpe 1987: 94).

If we *are* currently in a post-industrial society, we would expect that it is the meritocratic allocation of individuals to occupational positions that has created the observed mobility patterns: the achieved characteristics of individuals should be sufficient to account for their positions in the class structure. That is, the net association between origins and destinations should be entirely explainable by reference to the ‘merit’ of the individual (see especially Saunders 1995, 1997). However, even after controlling for educational qualifications, significant relationships between origins and destinations remain (e.g. Breen and

² In fact, the definition of ‘achieved’ raises more problems for the traditional literature on meritocracy. Meritocratic characteristics are defined as qualifications or IQ+Effort, although it is clear that IQ is primarily an ascribed characteristic. This problem tends to be ignored in discussions of the ascription/achievement distinction in the liberal thesis of industrialism, and thus IQ is taken to be included among ‘achieved’ characteristics.

³ Throughout this paper, the term ‘post-industrial’ (Bell 1973) will refer to the highest stage of the industrialisation process.

Whelan 1993; Breen 1998). For example, among people with similar educational levels, those from service class origins are more likely to be found in the service class themselves than are those from working class origins (Heath et al. 1992: 235; Marshall and Swift 1996). In addition, there is no evidence of an ever-tightening bond between education and occupation as industrialisation progresses. In fact, while education may have had increasing importance for several decades of the Twentieth century, there is some suggestion that the bond might now be loosening. Furthermore, using direct measures of IQ+effort, rather than the supposed proxy measure of education, still does not remove the association between family origin and destination: advantages relating to family origin tend to remain even after controlling for scores on aptitude tests (Jencks 1972, Breen and Goldthorpe 1999). Therefore, the argument that post-industrial society is a meritocracy, in the sense that different levels of education and IQ+Effort can explain differences in relative mobility chances, should be treated with extreme scepticism on the basis of current research into the subject⁴.

One reason why the theory of meritocracy might fail to fully explain inequalities in relative mobility chances is that the meritocratic model is not necessarily a good model of how occupational allocation works in post-industrial societies. There is no direct link between high levels of education or IQ+effort and high-level jobs, just as there is no direct link between low levels of 'merit' and low-level jobs. A high level of education and a high IQ do not in themselves magically lead to an allocation to a high-level job. Class inequalities in mobility chances are created, not given, in that they are the macro-level result of a whole range of micro-level decisions by employers and prospective employees. While the 'logic of industrialism' and the 'needs' of the post-industrial society and economy may well be compelling forces in post-industrial society, individual employers and recruiters do not inevitably act according to this script. Employers may not wish to employ on the basis of meritocratic criteria as understood by sociologists if they believe that the particular occupation requires other kinds of attributes and characteristics. What matters in terms of who gets employed is ultimately what employers judge to be valuable. The employer is the one who responds to market forces, and the employer is therefore the one who will decide what counts as 'merit'.

This paper is an attempt to find out what employers are really looking for when they hire employees. Instead of assuming that achieved characteristics, whether conceived of in a narrow or broad way, are the only things of importance to employers, I ask just what other factors are involved in 'merit' as employers define it.

Methodology

The data in this paper are taken from a content analysis of 955 newspaper job advertisements for a comprehensive range of occupations⁵. A purposive sample, designed to achieve an accurate representation of the range of jobs in the occupational structure was taken over the period of one month, from February 21st to March 19th 2000. Both national and local newspapers were sampled. In terms of national newspapers, all newspapers (quality and tabloid) with circulation figures of 250,000 or more, which contained job advertisements, were

⁴ Such analyses have only concentrated on testing the narrow merit selection hypothesis. The influence of achieved merit characteristics as construed here in the broad merit selection hypothesis remains untested in mobility research.

⁵ The 955 advertisements analysed here represent just under a fifth of the total sample of advertisements collected. Therefore the analyses presented in this paper represent preliminary analyses of a fraction of the total sample of advertisements. With the full sample of 5000 advertisements I will be able to repeat these analyses using a much finer occupational classification.

sampled. The quality national newspaper advertisements tended to be concentrated on higher-end managerial and professional occupations, while the tabloids contained advertisements for a much wider range of jobs throughout the occupational structure. In order not to bias the sample towards the higher occupations, only every other advertisement was sampled from the quality newspapers. As the tabloid newspapers in general contained fewer advertisements for a wider range of occupations, all advertisements were included in the sample. In addition to the national newspapers, it was also important to include local newspapers in the sample for two main reasons. Firstly, the national newspapers tended to focus on high-level jobs, mainly based in the major cities such as London, or Birmingham. A sample of local newspapers ensured that the sample of jobs could claim to be representative of the whole country. Secondly, the local newspapers are often more accessible to many employers than the national newspapers: advertising in a national newspaper carries a very high cost. Local newspapers are far cheaper in general, and as such, smaller and local-level employers are more likely to advertise. The sample of local newspapers was taken from fourteen local areas across England, Scotland and Wales⁶. Some of the areas are particularly strong in craft and related industries, some in professional and technical occupations, some in machine operative occupations. The areas also provide a good mix of industries of employment (e.g., manufacturing, government and service industries, agriculture, and distribution). From these fourteen local areas, the highest circulating weekly paper was taken, and every advertisement was sampled, both because of the wider range of jobs (if anything skewed towards the lower-level jobs) and because local newspapers generally have far fewer advertisements than the national papers. The complete sample, therefore, included advertisements taken from the following newspapers:

National: *Daily Mail, Daily Record, Daily Star, Daily Telegraph, The Express, The Express on Sunday, Financial Times, The Guardian, The Independent, Independent on Sunday, The Mirror, The Observer, The Sun, The Sunday Telegraph, The Sunday Times, The Times*

Local: *Barrow Advertiser, Basildon Yellow Advertiser, Bridgwater Times, Bury Mercury, Cardiff Post, Chelmsford Weekly News, Colchester Express, Edinburgh Herald and Post, Isle of Wight County Press, Leeds Weekly News, Lichfield Mercury, North Staffs Advertiser, Oxford Star, Plymouth Extra*

Although the sample analysed here is not a truly random sample of newspapers, this should not have a detrimental effect on validity. There is no real reason to suppose that the practice of advertising will differ to any great extent in different areas of the country.

Each advertisement was analysed for which characteristics were requested of the potential employee using a 'manifest coding' (Holsti 1969). This is a strict count of the 'objective' information contained in the advertisements, such as whether educational qualifications, or social skills, or experience etc. were required. The coding categories were designed to provide detailed coverage of all characteristics, such that the categories could be analysed alone or combined with other categories to evaluate hypotheses and theoretical concerns (see Appendix 1 for a full copy of the coding scheme). The cross tabulations presented in the results section will indicate the numbers of advertisements that mention a

⁶ The fourteen local areas were: Barrow in Furness, Leeds (The North); Felixstowe, Lichfield, Stoke-on Trent (The Midlands); Chelmsford, Colchester, London, Newport (Isle of Wight), Oxford (The South East); Bridgwater, Plymouth (The South West); Edinburgh (Scotland); Cardiff (Wales).

specific characteristic at least once. The occupations to which the advertisements related were coded into a set of occupational groups on the basis of the occupational title presented in the advertisement. The occupations are coded to SOC2000, the new occupational classification schema recently adopted by the Office of National Statistics. In this paper, I will be using the nine major occupational groups of SOC2000, represented thus:

Occupational Group	N	% of Total Sample (to 1 d.p.)
1: Managers and Senior Officials	86	9.0
2: Professional Occupations	113	11.8
3: Associate Professional and Technical Occupations	189	19.8
4: Administrative and Secretarial Occupations	164	17.2
5: Skilled Trades Occupations	64	6.7
6: Personal Service Occupations	79	8.3
7: Sales and Customer Service Occupations	64	6.7
8: Process, Plant and Machine Operatives	73	7.6
9: Elementary Occupations	123	12.9
TOTAL	955	100.0

While the dataset analysed here provides an original and rich source of information about job advertisements, and therefore the job requirements which employers see as important to include in advertisements, there are problems associated with data of this kind. The concentration of certain types of advertisements in certain newspapers may be seen as a problem. For example, the vast majority of the higher-level occupations are advertised in the national newspapers, while the numbers of lower-level occupations are minimal. Furthermore, the styles of advertisement may differ between national and local newspapers: national newspaper advertisements are generally longer and more detailed than advertisements in local newspapers. This may be attributed to employers for higher-level occupations requesting high numbers of characteristics in their potential employee, or it may just be an artefact of the type of newspaper. The standardised nature of the advertisements creates further difficulties: advertisers are limited by space, finances and the style of the newspaper in

terms of the advertisements they wish to place. A very particular format is required of advertisements, and it is possible that advertisers are inhibited by this. The assumption taken here is that while this format is a constraint on the nature of the data, all advertisements have been subject to the same constraint, so that the differences between them will still be of interest. However, a more serious concern regarding job advertisements is that employers might not be laying down everything they would hope to find in an employee within an advertisement. So, just because an advertisement does not make a request for certain qualifications or skills does not mean that the employer does not want such characteristics in the individual eventually employed. Of course, employers may value other characteristics never requested in the advertisements. This paper cannot comment on how far advertisements make explicit the characteristics desired in the individual who is eventually employed, although in future research I hope to interview personnel managers to gain some hold on this issue⁷. In this paper, I assume that the purpose of newspaper job advertisements is to create a field of potential employees: the requirements in the advertisements are signals that employers send out to create a good field. Given the time and costs involved in placing an advertisement at all, it would seem perverse that employers were not providing at least some information about what they are looking for in an employee (even if the later stages of the recruitment process are influenced by other factors). Therefore, despite these problems I believe that newspaper advertisements *do* provide a useful way of finding out what employers require in the first instance from their potential employees.

Results

This paper will first examine the demand in advertisements for educational qualifications in job advertisements, moving on to consider the demand for qualifications in general. The Merit Selection hypothesis would predict that such meritocratic characteristics will be important for employers, and we would therefore expect that qualifications will be mentioned over and above all other types of characteristics in advertisements for occupations throughout the occupational structure. After looking at the importance of qualifications for employers, the value of more direct measures of ability and effort will be considered. Having examined the narrow merit selection hypothesis, I then move on to consider the broad merit selection hypothesis, where merit is considered in its broader sense as being an ‘achieved’ attribute. Technical skills fall into this category. While these skills are not generally included in the traditional narrow formulation of the MS hypothesis, they do appear to be plausible candidates for being included as indicators of merit. Finally, I will assess the importance of non-meritocratic characteristics for employers, as judged by the demand for such characteristics in job advertisements. If non-meritocratic characteristics are used as criteria for judging the suitability of an employee, this will count as evidence against the MS and Meritocracy theses.

Education and Qualifications

In modern industrial societies, academic educational qualifications are seen to largely operate as a proxy measure of an individual’s inner capacities. Young’s depiction of merit as being equivalent to IQ+Effort is usually accepted to be well represented by an individual’s educational achievements. In a meritocracy, academic qualifications should be the passport for entering higher level positions. Therefore, if the move from ascription to achievement has occurred in the allocation of occupational positions, we would expect to see the demand for academic qualifications to be higher in the higher level occupational groups, and lower in the

⁷ A category for ‘Implicit qualifications’ and ‘Implicit skills’ in the content analysis was an attempt to control for requirements not made explicit in the advertisements. For example, an advertisement for a teacher would be coded for implicit qualifications even if there was no explicit request for qualifications.

groups towards the bottom of the occupational structure. Table 1, Column A illustrates that there is some evidence for this being the case.

Table 1: Demand For a Range of Required Characteristics

Occupational Group	% of Advertisements which required at least one:							N
	A: Academic Qualification	B: Qualification	C: Cognitive Ability	D: Effort Characteristic	E: Narrow Meritocratic Characteristic	F: Technical Skill	G: Broad Meritocratic Characteristic	
1: Managers and Senior Officials	15.1	20.9	27.9	55.8	66.3	60.5	84.9	86
2: Professional Occupations	75.2	75.2	9.7	31.0	83.2	46.0	98.2	113
3: Associate Professional and Technical Occupations	15.9	24.9	27.5	53.4	64.6	60.8	86.8	189
4: Administrative and Secretarial Occupations	11.6	15.2	32.9	41.5	53.0	76.2	86.6	164
5: Skilled Trades Occupations	3.1	29.7	9.4	18.8	37.5	64.1	85.9	64
6: Personal Service Occupations	0.0	11.4	1.3	32.9	30.4	19.0	45.6	79
7: Sales and Customer Service Occupations	1.6	1.6	6.3	46.9	37.5	21.9	50.0	64
8: Process, Plant and Machine Operatives	1.4	4.1	1.4	13.7	11.0	26.0	32.9	73
9: Elementary Occupations	0.0	2.4	1.6	11.4	9.8	2.4	12.2	123
Total	9.6	22.0	16.2	36.0	47.3	45.7	68.3	955
Chi-Square^a	X ² = 70.53, 8 d.f., p<.001	X ² = 255.94, 8 d.f., p<.001	X ² = 114.52, 8 d.f., p<.001	X ² = 102.93 8 d.f., p<.001	X ² = 217.76, 8 d.f., p<.001	X ² = 236.83, 8 d.f., p<.001	X ² = 371.70, 8 d.f., p<.001	

^a The cross tabulations in this paper have been tested for statistical significance using a Pearson Chi-Square test, which assesses how far the differences in mean values between occupational groups could have resulted by chance. A statistically significant result (p<.005) provides evidence that the mean values for each group are not equal, and that the observed differences are unlikely to have resulted by chance.

It is clear from Table 1 that there is one group for which academic educational qualifications are highly demanded: the Professional Occupations. In this group, academic qualifications are demanded in over 75% of the advertisements. However, for the remaining groups, academic qualifications are far less frequently demanded. There is some evidence that academic qualifications are *more* important for the top four occupational groups, but demand tapers off completely for groups five and below. In these lower-end groups, academic qualifications are asked for only rarely, with, for example, a maximum of 3% of advertisements for Group 5: Skilled Trades Occupations, including a request for education. The demand for academic qualifications also varies in qualitative terms: the types of educational qualifications requested vary by occupational group. For the Professional Occupations, degree level qualifications (or above) are most frequently demanded, in addition to a professional qualification. Degree level qualifications are also demanded with some frequency in Group 1: Managers and Senior Officials. However, A-Levels and GCSEs (school level qualifications) characterise the academic qualifications demanded in the remaining occupational groups. This provides some evidence for both a quantitative and a qualitative variation in the demand for academic qualifications over different occupational groups.

While there is evidence for academic qualifications being requested in job advertisements, in particular for the higher level groups, what is striking from the data is in fact how *few* advertisements contain a demand for educational qualifications at all. Over the whole of the sample, only 9.6% of advertisements requested at least one qualification. If occupational attainment in modern industrial societies really is based on certified educational attainment, it is somewhat puzzling that in over 90% of advertisements academic educational qualifications were not even mentioned. Of course, in many cases, qualifications are likely to be implicitly required, even if there is no explicit request for them in job advertisements. However, in a society characterised by merit selection, we might expect academic qualifications to play a more influential and *overt* role in job advertisements.

In sociological research, academic educational qualifications are most frequently referred to as being influential in occupational attainment, and the effects of education on mobility chances have been thoroughly tested. However, other types of qualifications have sometimes been overlooked. Employers often make requests for other types of qualifications in the job advertisements: these may be vocational, or technical, or professional. For some occupational groups, these types of qualifications may be more important than the academic educational ones. The overall demand for all types of qualifications is presented in Table 1, Column B, which accumulates academic educational, vocational, technical, professional and other types of qualifications (including implicit qualifications). When all types of qualifications are considered together, the percentage of advertisements requesting any qualification increases to 22.0% (from only 9.6% requesting an educational qualification). Professional Occupations still dominate the demand for qualifications, with just over 75% of advertisements containing at least one request for a qualification⁸. Groups 1, 3 and 4 also contain modest demands for qualifications. However, the most striking feature of Figure 2. is the demand for qualifications in nearly 30% of advertisements for Group 5: Skilled Trades Occupations. This is an increase of over 25% from the demand for academic qualifications in that group. This increase is mainly due to advertisements for that group requesting vocational and technical qualifications specifically certifying competence and skill for a particular occupation. For example, electricians are expected to hold certificates of competence in dealing with electrical equipment, while head chefs are required to have certified skills in food preparation. The

⁸ For the Professional Occupations, all advertisements which mentioned a professional qualification were automatically recorded as also requiring an academic educational qualification. In order to gain a professional qualification in this group, one first needs to obtain very high certified educational qualifications.

prevalence of this demand for vocational and technical qualifications in the job advertisements illustrates clearly how employers value certificated skills in addition to traditional educational qualifications. However, for some jobs, it seems that qualifications of any kind are not required. Advertisements for groups 7, 8 and 9 contain hardly any requests for qualifications, even vocational or technical qualifications. This would suggest that for occupations at the bottom of the occupational structure, qualifications hold little or no immediate value to employers, and is consistent with what the narrow MS hypothesis would predict.

Table 1 provides some evidence that qualifications *are* important to employers. However, it also shows that the requests for qualifications are concentrated in certain occupational groups: there is no clear trend for requests for qualifications to steadily increase as one moves higher in the occupational structure. Furthermore, while 22.0% of advertisements contain a request for any type of qualification, an increase from 9.6% for educational qualifications, in objective terms this is still a very low figure. In a society where higher-level occupational positions are predicted to be achieved on the basis of qualifications, we would expect significantly more advertisements in the higher occupational groups to contain a request for qualifications. Therefore, the evidence is far from conclusive in terms of the narrow MS hypothesis: if jobs truly are allocated *primarily* on the basis of exhibited qualifications, as the hypothesis would predict, it is not reflected in the job advertisements studied here.

Ability plus Effort

While qualifications would seem to be the most likely source of information about ‘merit’ that employers would utilise, it is not implausible that employers may have other ways of ascertaining “ability plus effort” apart from the educational level presented by the job candidate. That is, they may attempt to judge for themselves how able and willing a prospective employee is, and this would be reflected in the job advertisements. If educational and other types of qualifications are not a good reflection of the capacities of an individual, we may get a more accurate picture of the importance of meritocratic criteria by taking more direct measures of ability plus effort. In the content analysis, requirements which related to ‘ability’ were coded as ‘cognitive abilities’ (for example, ‘highly organised’, ‘really bright’, and ‘analytical skills’) and those which related to ‘effort’ were coded into the broad category of ‘job commitment characteristics’ (for example, ‘motivated’, ‘reliable’, ‘positive attitude’, ‘hardworking’). Again, if the MS hypothesis is correct, we would expect that ability and effort requirements would vary by occupational group.

Table 1, Columns C and D, show the frequency of requests for ability and effort in the advertisements. Groups 1, 3 and 4 contain the highest demands for cognitive abilities, with around 30% of the advertisements for these groups requesting such an ability. Cognitive abilities are most frequently requested in the Administrative and Secretarial Occupations Group. Interestingly, in contrast to Groups 1 and 3, the advertisements for Group 2, the Professional Occupations, contain quite a low demand for cognitive abilities. As we have just seen, this group exhibited by far the largest demand for qualifications in the advertisements. This may suggest that employers for this occupational group largely rely on qualifications (primarily educational qualifications) to provide a measure of an individual’s capacity, rather than using other more direct measures such as a request for cognitive abilities. For Groups 1, 3 and 4, demands for cognitive abilities seem to operate in addition to qualifications, and in fact are requested more frequently. It may be that employers for these occupational groups do not take qualifications as a proxy for ‘merit’, and include requirements for cognitive abilities in their advertisements in preference to requirements for qualifications. For the groups at the bottom end of the occupational structure, cognitive abilities are rarely requested. While

cognitive abilities are shown to be influential for some occupational groups, overall, only 16.2% of advertisements make a request for such abilities in comparison to the 22.0% of advertisements which request a qualification.

The picture presented in terms of effort is slightly ambiguous in terms of the meritocratic model, in that one would expect that jobs towards the higher end of the occupational structure would be more likely to require high levels of effort than the lower level ones. If occupations were subject to increased selection by merit as one moved upwards through the occupational structure, we would expect to find that requirements for both ability and effort increased as well. In fact, if anything, the pattern is virtually trendless across occupational groups. Only for the lowest two groups (Process, Plant and Machine Operatives, and Elementary Occupations) and Group 5 (Skilled Trades Occupations), does the percentage of advertisements requesting job motivation characteristics drop below 30%. However, of all the different types of meritocratic criteria, job commitment characteristics are mentioned with a far greater frequency across the advertisements (mentioned in 36% of advertisements, against 22% for all qualifications, and 16.2% for cognitive abilities). In fact, effort is usually valued even without cognitive abilities – many jobs seem to be reliant on hard-workers, especially in the lower occupational groups. This suggests that job commitment characteristics are valued in themselves by employers across virtually the whole of the occupational structure.

Given our interest in whether modern industrial societies are characterised by increasing merit selection, it is prudent to examine how far employers are using any narrow meritocratic characteristic in their advertisements. By combining all of the possible narrow meritocratic measures (qualifications, cognitive abilities and job commitment characteristics) into one measure, whereby at least one narrow meritocratic characteristic is requested in the advertisement, we obtain Column E of Table 1. Table 1 is able to provide some support for the narrow MS hypothesis. Groups towards the higher end of the occupational structure are characterised by a higher demand for meritocratic characteristics, while those towards the bottom exhibit the lowest demand (to a minimum of 9.8% of advertisements in Group 9 requesting meritocratic characteristics). The highest demand for meritocratic criteria is in the Professional Occupations group, where 83.2% of advertisements contain a demand for at least one meritocratic characteristic. Nevertheless, meritocratic characteristics are mentioned in only 47.3% of the total number of advertisements, which suggests that while employers are using measures of ‘merit’ to allocate occupational positions, other selection mechanisms are also at work. This is in line with previous empirical research (e.g., Breen and Goldthorpe 1999; Marshall et al. 1997). While educational levels, qualifications and other meritocratic criteria can account for part of the occupation allocation process, employers also have an interest in attributes other than the narrow meritocratic ones so far identified.

Technical Skills

In many cases qualifications and measures of merit may be of less direct relevance to the occupation than skills of other kinds may be. While academic and other types of qualifications may indicate a certain level of competence and potential for learning, there are many occupations for which previously learned skills will be essential. For example, a secretary needs to be able to type quickly and take shorthand in order to carry out the job effectively. A reasonable level of education may be desirable in addition to these skills, but without the skills themselves it will be difficult to function as a secretary. Thus, technical skills may be seen as competencies which are of value to employers. Furthermore, these skills are primarily achieved, and in the broader form of the MS hypothesis we would include these types of skills alongside official formal qualifications. Demands for technical skills (both explicit and implicit) and experience in the advertisements are reported in Table 1, Column F.

From the table we can see that technical skills are requested with some frequency in the higher five occupational groups. In these groups, 45% and over of the advertisements contain demands for technical skills, rising to over 76% in the Administrative and Secretarial Occupations category. In fact, technical skills appear to be an important characteristic for employers in all but Group 9: Elementary Occupations. We may speculate that the occupations in Group 9 tend to be those where skills can be quickly learnt 'on the job', and therefore previous training is not essential. Nevertheless, for all groups but the Professional Occupations, technical skills are mentioned far more frequently than any type of qualification. This suggests that instead of looking simply for evidence that an employee will be willing and able to learn, employers are seeking particular skills and competencies relevant to the job itself. Rather than looking for credentials and generalised ability, employers are looking for the ability to carry through a specific task. This is particularly pertinent for the groups in the middle of the occupational structure, which combine a modest demand for qualifications (ranging from 15-30%) with a fairly high demand for technical skills (ranging from 61-76%). It is possible that the demand for skills is replacing the demand for qualifications to a large extent in these cases.

Table 1, Column G presents the demand in advertisements for any meritocratic characteristic, as construed in the broad Merit Selection hypothesis. The highest demand for these characteristics is in Group 2: Professional Occupations, where 98% of advertisements contain such a requirement. However, over 84% of advertisements for occupations in Groups 1-5 require at least one broad meritocratic characteristic. Demand is lowest in Group 9, where just over 12% of advertisements contain a request. Overall, just over 68% of advertisements contain a requirement for at least one broad meritocratic characteristic.

Experience

Experience confirms competency in a particular role. Employers can be more secure in employing an experienced person: the individual will be in possession of the necessary competencies if they have done the job before. Experience is also valuable to employers because it reduces the costs of training new recruits, and provides some measure of the stability and co-operation of the employee (Blackburn and Mann 1979). While experience may appear at first to be a 'meritocratic' characteristic in the sense implied by the BMSH, it is clear that the necessary competencies confirmed by possessing relevant experience may well be non-meritocratic. If an employer requires an experienced barmaid, he may be using her experience as evidence that she is attractive and friendly to customers, rather than to confirm that she is able to carry out the technical skills necessary in the job. Therefore, experience is not included as a meritocratic characteristic, although neither is it counted as a non-meritocratic one. Table 2, Column A illustrates that employers do indeed value experience.

Table 2: Demand For a Range of Required Characteristics

Occupational Group	% of Advertisements which required at least one:			D: % of Advertisements in which No Characteristics were Required	N
	A: Experience	B: Social Skill	C: Personal Characteristic		
1: Managers and Senior Officials	86.0	59.3	45.3	1.2	86
2: Professional Occupations	71.7	20.4	31.0	1.8	113
3: Associate Professional and Technical Occupations	66.7	34.9	41.3	2.1	189
4: Administrative and Secretarial Occupations	42.7	25.0	37.2	6.7	164
5: Skilled Trades Occupations	67.2	10.9	9.4	4.7	64
6: Personal Service Occupations	32.9	12.7	29.1	24.1	79
7: Sales and Customer Service Occupations	42.2	28.1	39.1	18.8	64
8: Process, Plant and Machine Operatives	32.9	2.7	16.4	16.4	73
9: Elementary Occupations	13.0	2.4	21.1	61.0	123
Total	48.7	23.1	31.9	14.6	955
Chi-Square ^a	X ² = 184.17, 8 d.f., p<.001	X ² = 136.64, 8 d.f., p<.001	X ² = 48.26, 8 d.f., p<.001	X ² = 283.86, 8 d.f., p<.001	

The highest demand for experience is in Group 1: Managers and Senior Officials, where 86.0% of the advertisements include experience as a job requirement. However, experience is prominent as a requirement for most of the occupational groups: nearly 49% of the total number of advertisements request experience. There is a gradient in evidence, with high levels of requests for experience in the higher groups tailoring off as we move down the occupational structure. Even in Group 9, however, experience is requested 13.0% of the time.

Social Skills and Personal Characteristics

As well as listing qualifications, technical skills and experience as requirements, job advertisements contain a whole range of social skills and personal characteristics that employees are desired to have. These characteristics may well count as merit in the eyes of employers, but cannot be seen as 'meritocratic' in the sense implied by either the broad or the narrow MS hypothesis. Social skills can be difficult to classify as either achieved or ascriptive characteristics: many social skills may be possible to learn in principle, but they may also be associated with the socialisation processes of certain social backgrounds. However, the existence of personal characteristics at all in advertisements tells against the meritocracy thesis to a degree, as many of these characteristics are ascribed, and are more difficult to achieve than for example, qualifications. Examples of required social skills may be 'communication skills' or 'leadership abilities', while personal characteristics may include possessing a specific appearance ('presentable'), or levels of moral or physical attributes. Psychological characteristics other than cognitive skills (such as 'good sense of humour') are also personal characteristics that appear relevant to advertisers. Columns B and C of Table 2 suggest that social skills and personal characteristics are valued in addition to 'meritocratic' characteristics.

Requirements for social skills are made in advertisements throughout the occupational structure. Demand is highest in Group 1: Managers and Senior Officials, where almost 60% of the advertisements request some type of social skill. The *types* of social skill differ by occupational group, with Group 1 advertisements concentrating on managerial skills and leadership abilities, and advertisements for Groups 3 and 4 concentrating on team-working and client interaction skills. Clearly, the ability to perform well in a social environment is of value to employers. Table 2 also provides evidence that personal characteristics are important to employers over the whole occupational structure. Even in the higher occupational groups, personal characteristics are requested fairly frequently. The highest demand for personal characteristics is in Group 1: Managers and Senior Officials, where 45.3% of the advertisements contain at least one request. Ironically, personal characteristics are actually requested in advertisements more frequently than any type of qualification (32.9% in comparison to 22.0% for all qualifications). The existence of requests for such characteristics rather than qualifications in the higher-end occupational groups tends to undermine the thesis that in modern post-industrial societies selection to the higher-level jobs is based primarily on achievement. Personal, non-meritocratic characteristics are important for employers for occupations throughout the occupational structure.

No Characteristics Requested

While the vast majority of advertisements contained a request for at least one characteristic, a number of advertisements did not contain a demand for any characteristics at all. This may indicate that employers wish to select on the basis of something other than an advertisement, or it may indicate that there are certain jobs for which anyone is suitable to apply. Table 2, Column D illustrates how many advertisements contained no requested characteristics.

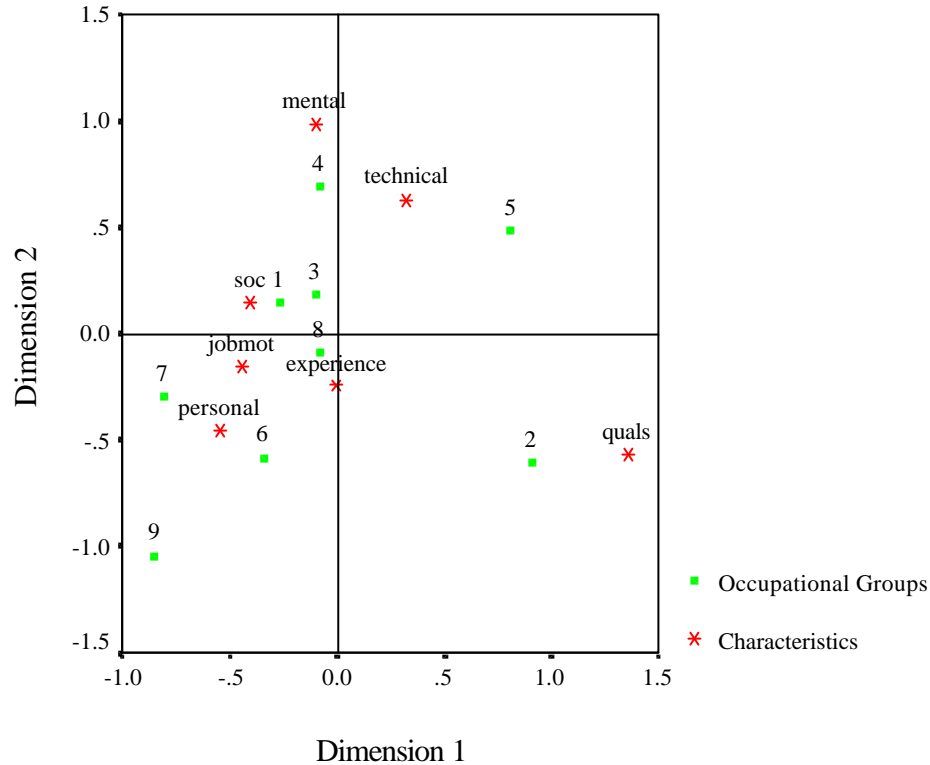
As the table shows, the higher-level occupational groups generally contained at least one requested characteristic; only very small percentages of advertisements did not specify any particular characteristic as being desirable. However, it is a very different story for the occupations at the lower end of the structure: as many as 61.0% of advertisements in Group 9: Elementary Occupations did not request any characteristics. This may suggest that for lower-level occupations, 'Who you are' is of less importance than 'Are you available to work?' It is probable that for such low-level occupations, training is likely to be minimal and 'on the job', and the picture of some form of pool of labour may approximate the employers' reality. That is, virtually anyone is capable of learning and holding low-level jobs, and as such, employers can afford to advertise for any person who may be available.

Differences Between Occupational Groups

While the previous Tables have presented individual requested characteristics profiles, broken down by occupational group, this paper also has an interest in how far *groups differ* from one another in their requested characteristics profiles. That is, *within* each occupational group, how does the percentage of advertisements requesting social skills or experience compare to the percentage of advertisements requesting qualifications? I will now use correspondence analysis to map the associations between requested characteristics and occupational groups as points in a two dimensional space. Correspondence analysis examines the relations between the categories of two discrete variables, and transforms a complex data matrix into a more simple data matrix by removing 'noise' and redundant information (Clausen 1998: 1). This can then be presented visually as points within a space and interpreted. Points that are close together in the space represent categories with similar distributions, while categories with dissimilar distributions are positioned far apart. Figure 1. presents a correspondence analysis applied to the occupational groups and requested characteristics discussed above⁹.

⁹ The category, 'No required characteristics' is excluded from this analysis, as its inclusion over-dominates the distribution and clusters the other characteristics together, making interpretation difficult. The analysis including 'No required characteristics' can be supplied by the author on request. The categories 'Academic Qualifications' and 'Narrow Meritocratic' and 'Broad Meritocratic' characteristics are excluded from the analysis to avoid repetition: 'All Qualifications' includes academic qualifications, and 'Meritocratic' is broken down into its constituent components of 'All Qualifications', 'Cognitive Abilities', 'Job Motivation Characteristics' and 'Technical Skills' for the analysis.

Figure 1: A Graphic Presentation of the Results of Correspondence Analysis Applied to Occupational Groups and Requested Characteristics



Occupational Groups

- 1: Managers and Senior Officials
- 2: Professional Occupations
- 3: Associate Professional and Technical Occupations
- 4: Administrative and Secretarial Occupations
- 5: Skilled Trades Occupations
- 6: Personal Service Occupations
- 7: Sales and Customer Service Occupations
- 8: Process, Plant and Machine Operatives
- 9: Elementary Occupations

Characteristics key:

- experience = Experience
- jobmot = Job Motivation/Effort
- mental = Cognitive Abilities
- personal = Personal Characteristics
- quals = Qualifications
- soc = Social Skills
- technical = Technical Skills

Figure 1 represents the association of the occupational group categories with the different requested characteristics. The positions of the points indicate that certain occupational groups are associated with certain types of requested characteristics. One of the most striking associations in the plot is the proximity of Group 2: Professional Occupations (and to a lesser extent, Group 5: Skilled Trades Occupations) to qualifications. This implies that the association between these two groups and qualifications is far stronger than for the other occupational groups. Groups 1, 3 and 8 cluster around the centre of the plot, along with social skills, job

motivation characteristics and experience. Groups 6 and 7 are fairly close to this cluster, although they are more closely associated with the point representing personal characteristics. These occupational groups, it seems, are not strongly associated with meritocratic criteria except in the case of 'Effort' (that is, job motivation). The point representing Group 4: Administrative and Secretarial Occupations, is close to both cognitive abilities and technical skills, but again, quite some distance from qualifications. The point representing Group 9: Elementary Occupations, is set apart from the other points, suggesting that this occupational group is not strongly associated with either any particular requested characteristic or any other occupational group. An interesting feature of the plot is the apparent distance between the different measures of 'meritocratic' criteria. In the introduction to this paper, two different formulations of what counts as merit were identified: the narrow definition of 'IQ+Effort' (Young's definition), or qualifications, which are seen to provide a good proxy measure for 'IQ+Effort'; and the broad definition of 'achieved', which includes technical skills and experience. Given these definitions, we might expect the points representing cognitive abilities, job motivation characteristics, qualifications, technical skills and experience to cluster together. The fact that this does not happen suggests that employers for some occupational groups use different measures of 'merit' from employers for other groups. For example, employers for Group 2 use qualifications as a measure of how appropriate a job candidate is, creating the association between the points representing Group 2 and qualifications. Employers for other occupational groups, such as Groups 1 and 4, use more direct indicators of 'merit', such as levels of job commitment or cognitive abilities. What is most clear from the plot is how far some 'meritocratic' and achieved characteristics cluster *together* with the 'non-meritocratic' and possibly ascribed ones. Except in the case of qualifications, achieved merit characteristics are associated with social skills and personal characteristics. This suggests that for employers, meritocratic characteristics are of most value when they are also combined with other types of characteristics.

Discussion

This paper has examined how far occupational allocation in modern societies is characterised by merit selection. The job advertisements reveal that achieved characteristics, such as qualifications or more direct measures of 'IQ+Effort' are demanded by a significant number of employers, especially for the higher occupational groups. Around half of all the advertisements in the sample contained a demand for at least one narrow meritocratic characteristic, and in the higher occupational groups over 60% of the advertisements contained such a demand. When the hypothesis is broadened to include achieved technical skills, over 68% of all advertisements contain a demand. However, while achieved merit characteristics *are* important to employers, other 'non-meritocratic' criteria also have a significant role. Even where achieved merit characteristics are emphasised, they seem to be of value in combination with other types of requested characteristics. It seems, therefore, that educational qualifications are not the only characteristics of importance in the process of occupational allocation in modern societies, as the liberal thesis of industrialism would have claimed. This is consistent with recent results that suggest that while there may have been a 'tightening bond' between educational attainment and occupational attainment in the mid twentieth century, the role of education is now, if anything, becoming less important in the modern industrial society.

While the principle of meritocracy may have been stressed by sociologists predicting increased merit selection, in a free market it *is* ultimately the employers who decide what 'merit' is, and their definitions of 'merit' may be far wider-ranging than those usually considered by sociologists. In particular, to equate the narrow meritocratic distribution of individuals to occupations with an allocation based on educational qualifications, or ability and

effort, is to take it for granted that these credentials provide an adequate indication of people's merits in a market context (Marshall et al. 1997: 145; Collins 1974). For many occupations, educational qualifications will have very little direct relevance to the type of work being carried out. The changing form of educational qualifications over this century can only be shown to be weakly related to the changing technical requirements of work (Cohen and Pfeffer 1986). It is likely, therefore, that educational qualifications represent something else to employers, related to the individual's capacity to successfully execute their job, or to their ability to learn, rather than being valued in themselves. Presumably, more educated workers would be preferred because they are believed to possess "skills" that less educated people may lack (Bills 1988; Spence 1981). It would seem that employers are more than aware that qualifications are only one characteristic of market value among many that an employee may bring with them to the workplace. This would go some way towards explaining why qualifications were demanded in the advertisements only 22.0% of the time.

In many cases, educational qualifications and levels of IQ+Effort might not be as pertinent to a particular occupation as other skills and attributes of the individual. Certain abilities and motivations may be useful in the particular occupational context as well as meritocratic criteria (see also Mayhew 1968). Following Marshall et al. (1997), we may call these 'relevant competencies'. There are many jobs for which formal educational qualifications can be regarded as a good indicator of relevant competencies, and in these cases we would expect a close fit between levels of educational and occupational attainment. However, there are many other types of occupation for which the abilities certified by education are far less applicable than other attributes and relevant competencies. There may well be a close connection between high educational attainment and, say, an academic professorship, but the connection is likely to be looser between educational attainment and a managerial position. The evidence from the advertisements supports this argument: over 75% of the advertisements for Group 2: Professional Occupations requested qualifications in contrast to 21% of the advertisements for Group 1: Managers and Senior Officials. Relevant competencies such as the ability to type quickly and accurately, and the ability to use certain computing packages may also be unrelated to particular academic educational qualifications, but closely related to appropriateness for a secretarial position; flight attendants must be well-presented and sympathetic to carry out their job (Hochschild 1983). Social skills are often requested in preference to educational qualifications: in Group 1: Managers Senior Officials, nearly 60% of all advertisements requested some type of social skill. In this paper, the service sector occupational groups were found to be associated with social skills. The widespread increase in demand for social skills has come about largely through the expansion of the service sector and an increase in jobs which require very specific types of these skills. Ability, then, as understood in either the narrow or the broad MS hypothesis may be of far less significance than a whole range of attitudinal, motivational and behavioural criteria (Blackburn and Mann 1979; Brown and Scase 1994; Townley 1989).

If factors such as relevant competencies, social skills and personal characteristics are important to employers, this is hardly surprising. However, it is possible (and even likely) that certain competencies and skills are more accessible to certain groups in society than others, and furthermore, such characteristics may be far more likely to be ascribed than achieved. For example, leadership qualities are essential for management positions, and such qualities are often derived through specific patterns of child-rearing, education, and class-based experiences (Scase and Goffee 1989). It is possible that, "...the kinds of ability meriting occupational success, but not adequately identified by measures of education, are possessed disproportionately by those born into relatively advantaged class backgrounds..." (Marshall et al. 1997: 149). The prevalence of requirements based on ascribed characteristics in the

advertisements therefore leaves the recruitment process wide open to a whole range of biases which may enter into the selection of employees. This may go some way towards explaining why inequalities in class mobility rates should remain even after controlling for educational qualifications and 'IQ+Effort'.

If this is the modern post-industrial society, the decisive move from ascription to achievement has not occurred yet. While the processes that allocate individuals to jobs cannot be described as purely ascriptive, they cannot be described as purely based on 'merit' either. Academic educational qualifications, and other types of achieved characteristics have been shown to be an extremely significant factor in the advertisements. However, the research presented here has also identified a significance for non-meritocratic characteristics previously ignored when testing the meritocracy thesis. The use of non-meritocratic, ascribed criteria to judge the suitability of an individual for a particular job remains a significant part of the recruitment process (see also Mayhew 1968), as in some cases, ascription is directly relevant to job performance: "who you are" shapes "what you can do" (Wilensky and Lawrence 1979: 213). If employers are using non-meritocratic, ascribed characteristics in the recruitment process, this would go some way to explaining why inequalities in class mobility chances persist, even after controlling for educational qualifications and measures of IQ and effort. It may also contribute to an understanding of why the bond between educational and occupational attainment is no longer tightening. This paper would argue that in order to understand how inequalities in relative mobility chances are formed it is necessary to consider both the meritocratic and non-meritocratic characteristics valued by employers. Only by considering both types of characteristics is it possible to gain an accurate understanding of how the process of occupational allocation works in modern industrial societies.

Appendix One: Coding Scheme

955 advertisements from a variety of occupations were analysed. The information from each advertisement was recorded individually on a coding sheet, and later entered into a computer database. Every time a characteristic relating to a job requirement was mentioned, it was recorded in the relevant category. Each advertisement contained up to approximately fifteen different requirements. The coding sheet contained categories as follows (examples of characteristics for some categories are included in parentheses):

Case Information

Case Number
Newspaper
Occupational Group (SOC2000)
Salary

Qualifications

Formal Academic Educational Qualifications

'O' Level/ GCSE

'A' Level

Degree ('Degree in...', 'Graduate')

Good Degree and Above ('PhD', 'Masters degree')

Other Qualifications

Professional Qualifications ('Qualified Accountant', 'Registered Nurse')

Vocational/Technical Qualifications ('Qualified to City and Guilds Level')

Implied Qualifications ('Strong Medical Background', 'Good academic record')

Cognitive Abilities

Well organised ('Organising skills', 'Can organise a busy workload')

General cognitive abilities ('Analytical flair', 'Intelligent', 'Shows attention to detail')

Job Commitment Characteristics

Motivated/Committed/Enthusiastic/Hardworking ('Positive attitude', 'Proactive')

Reliable ('Can be relied on')

Flexible ('Willingness to work inconvenient hours', 'Adaptable')

Responsible ('Responsible attitude')

Works well under pressure

Can work on own initiative

Other work related personal characteristics

Technical Skills

Computing and secretarial skills ('50 wpm', 'Administrative skills', 'Able to use computer packages')

Other job specific technical skills ('Able to build engines', 'Knowledge of ...', 'Good editorial skills', 'Marketing skills')

Literacy/Numeracy ('Proven numeracy')

Implied skills ('Mechanic', 'Electrician', 'Carpenter')

Experience

Experience essential ('3 years' experience required')

Experience desirable ('Experience preferred')

Employment record ('Track record', 'Proven record of achievement')

Social Skills

Interacts well with colleagues ('Team player', 'Able to interact well with other employees')

Managing employee skills ('Man-management skills', 'Can lead and motivate others')

Client interaction skills ('Can establish and maintain client contacts', 'Customer led')

General social skills ('Good interpersonal skills')

Verbal/Written communication skills ('Excellent communication skills', 'Able to communicate effectively')

Other Personal Characteristics

Demographic ('20-30 Years Old', 'Mature', 'Young')

Physical ('Physically Fit', 'Energetic')

Appearance/presentation ('Presentable', 'Of smart appearance', 'Well dressed')

Polite/well mannered ('Polite telephone manner')

Moral ('Committed Christian Preferred', 'Honest', 'Trustworthy')

Empathy ('Caring', 'Empathy with the needs of young people', 'Sensitivity')

Confident/Outgoing ('Bright', 'Outgoing personality')

Creative ('Creative ability')

Psychological (not cognitive) ('Good sense of humour', 'Not easily stressed')

Professional Approach ('Has a professional attitude', 'Highly professional')

High quality candidate ('Can leap buildings with a single bound')

Other personal characteristics

Other

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