

RECRUITING TALENT IN THE INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY FIELD: NO WAR, JUST WORRIES

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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades, intelligence and security organizations have been experiencing recurrent shortcomings in recruiting talent, important enough for them to become a matter of public knowledge, if not of concern, and also to fuel intra- and inter-agency high level conversations from time to time. In this article, the aim is to present a different perspective on framing the problem and to suggest some possible avenues for tackling it. The first argument is that the intelligence and security services not only face the challenge, but they hold the answers to it as well, since they already have a lot of resources and ways to address it. Second, the change of generations and therefore the constant shift of the overall context of the labor market should be the focus of senior management today and not to be used (and abused) as an easy excuse for underperforming HR.

Keywords: human resources, recruitment, intelligence agencies, talent management, leadership.

This article is based on a keynote speech I delivered at the Paris Defence and Strategy Forum at the beginning of 2024¹ that, together with the brilliant one of the former French Minister for Public Services, Mrs. Amelie de Montchalin, commenced the round table on the hot topic of *the war for talent in the intelligence and security field* and, overall, in the public sector.

The first aspect I would like to bring to your attention is the way we are framing the issue: the war for talent in the intelligence and security field is both a problem and a challenge. We are thinking and acting as if there is actually a war going on in the human resources (HR) field. This is not only wrong, but also counterproductive, despite the impressive references hinting at it or the way HR representatives from different intelligence and security organizations approach it.

In this line of work, we do not experience war. Competition, yes, but not war. This competition is not even new, not by far. And I will explain later on why. So, since this is not reality, then what is it? Well, it is a feeling. The organizations feel that they are in a war for talent and the feeling is real, although the war is not. Therefore yes, intelligence and security organizations do have a problem. What kind of a problem and what they can do about it are the real issues on which the attention should be focused.

I venture into saying that most of the time this is a rich people's (or organizations') problem. The problem for a poor individual or organization is simple: lack of resources, hence the war. A common problem for wealthy organizations is how to use the abundance of available resources. Moreover, this rich people's problem is twofold: first, it involves their perception of the way they see it, which itself might be wrong. The war for talent is not with all the other competitors on the open market, and there are many, as it happens in any good competition.

Looking into the French experience (or Romanian, or even US, for that matter), one should take it as a compliment that they are competing head-to-head with the likes of Orange for IT specialists, or with Thales and Airbus for engineers, because the war is with themselves, actually. Intelligence and security organizations do face

the problem of adequacy, as wealthy organizations in the field of human resources that they are. Believe it or not, they tend to forget that they are, at the end of the day, one of the best performing HR organizations in the world. This is what they do. In the basic training, when people join the services, this is what they learn - how to recruit people, how to motivate them, how to keep them happy, how to keep them close, and how to make them eager to perform. And it might come as a surprise the fact that most of the time it is not about the money, and almost never about the amount that the intelligence officers get as paycheck at the end of the month.

It is so surprising and somehow funny to see so many fundamentally HR organizations, like the intelligence and security services, complaining about the fact that they are losing the war for talent, because the market has changed, people have changed and they, well, they have not changed. Blame it on the Generation Z² (Gen Z) and be done with it. The first instinct should be to refuse to use Gen Z, basically the generation of many junior officers working in this field (and, funny enough, of the children of the senior officers from the services), as a scapegoat for their own shortcomings. It is not only wrong, but also counterproductive.

And this is the second part of the problem. Instead of nurturing the feeling that they are at war with Orange, Thales, or others, the intelligence and security organizations should acknowledge the fact that they face not only the problem, but they also hold the solution to it. And it is not about Gen Z, it is about the B³, X⁴, Y⁵ generations, because those people are today in high-ranking positions, worrying and complaining about the problems of the war with talented Zs and the "significant hurdles affecting the recruitment landscape" (Russell, 2024).

When I was still working for the Romanian Intelligence Service, our HR specialist tried to convince me and others that we live in an HR demand market that shifted a while ago from a very nice and cozy offer market, and we were basically paying too little to efficiently compete with the other competitors. This was and remains true today. But it is also irrelevant, because they have always competed with others. Believe it or

not, in this line of work, adversaries have usually paid - and still pay - their assets better. And the organizations have remained successful for decades now, like magic. How come? Well, if money were sufficient, the security and intelligence services would have never needed HR specialists, nor basic training on how to recruit somebody. They should just take the skills and tools that contribute to the very good and successful HUMINT organizations and use them for HR purposes. Thus, they should shift focus, once in a while, from recruiting for the purpose of national security, to recruiting for the benefit of the organization that works for national security.

However, in all fairness, even though this is an HR issue, we must acknowledge (and this does not excuse sloppy HR in any way) that the solution does not lie solely with HR. It is ultimately an executive leadership matter. And this is the second dimension of our problem. When *battling* for talent, the answer is always at the leadership level, because that is the level that gives organizations a needed shape and a welcoming face.

So, what are the core issues?

Firstly: no image is not an image. What is the image that the intelligence and security organizations project out there? And I am not speaking about public attitudes on this issue (because there is a lot of recurrent research on this topic worldwide⁶) but on the actual trusted information that you can find about the intelligence and security services. Most of the time, when they pitch a job to somebody it is like this: we are doing something, but we cannot exactly tell you what until you say yes. This will be a tremendous experience for you, but we cannot tell you what yet. It will not be easy, but it will be worth it, trust us! Meeting our HR guys is like going on a blind date with a serial killer, especially in our day and age when we research our future prospects, but they also research us.

And, unlike the huge amount of information that they can gather about Orange and how it is to be employed there, they cannot find too much about us, do they? Beyond the puzzling and sketchy things that are on our websites, some obscure literature about the past, a lot of fiction and adrenaline-full movies and (some, not all) well-deserved public accusations in the media for the failures, there is... nothing. When they say yes, our future colleagues bet more on fantasy than on reality. And after

a while, some are disappointed. Because that fantasy is not the reality of the organizations. Hence, the next problem is retention. So, we should highlight again that no image is not an image. And image sales or, in this case, buys. But the image in itself is, you guessed, an executive decision. And nowadays, more than ever, how to get the attention has to do with overall HR performance.

Secondly: let us focus on the meaningful adventure that this work has to offer, not only on the meaningful duty. I remember when many years ago, late into the night, after a difficult but rather funny operation, a colleague of mine, who is also retired now, told me in reference to our superiors: *Look, Cristian, if those guys had known how much fun we are having, they would have asked us to pay for it, instead of being paid, and we would have gladly done it.* And he was right. But to pay for it, you must afford it.

Thirdly: maybe instead of trying to find people that they can afford to hire, the intelligence and security organizations should look for people that can afford to work for them, that can afford this meaningful adventure and are willing to pay for it. Not in financial terms, of course, but time (most precious of all, family time), focus, easy life, quick gratification, personal freedom, and so on. For instance, instead of going just after fresh and no longer cheap talented graduates, maybe they should go for more seasoned professionals for which money is not an issue anymore. Or, instead of trying to find a bright student, they should also try to find the one that can afford to live in Paris or Bucharest. And the intelligence and security organizations should take every opportunity to acknowledge and to thank their well-to-do families for that and for their unintended beneficial impact on our national security. Chapeau!

We can go on and on about this, because it also entails allowing people to return to the services at ease after they got their full (in every sense of the word) at Orange, Thales, Airbus, and the likes. So, no longer a choice for life, but a series of multiple choices for the same work and the same employer. In this respect, all those organizations are becoming and should become, like the well-to-do families, benevolent but unintentional sponsors of our future recruitment and retention success.

Fourthly: tailor-made work conditions, not necessarily job descriptions. And by this we should understand work hours, work environment, work ergonomics, and so on. The HR specialists from most of the intelligence and security organizations still insist

¹ The Paris Defence and Strategy Forum (PDSF) was held on March 13-14, 2024, in Ecole Militaire de Paris, and it was organised by the French Defence University (ACADEM). Its specificity and unicity reside in the fact that it is the first event on defence and security of significant scope in France, bringing together international civilian and military subject matter experts. See more at <https://www.parisdefenceandstrategyforum.com/en/edition-2024/>.

² The generation born between 1997 and 2012, a digitally native generation, characterized by diversity, pragmatism, entrepreneurship, and social awareness.

³ Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, are work-oriented, loyal, value stability and authority.

⁴ The generation born between 1965 and 1980, also known as the *forgotten generation* or *sandwich generation* (between Baby Boomers and Millennials). They are characterized by independence, pragmatism, work-life balance, and adaptability.

⁵ Also known as the Millennials, the generation born between 1981 and 1996 is characterized by quick familiarization with the internet, digital technology, idealism, flexibility, driven by values such as work-life balance, and with an increased interest in purpose and meaning in career.

⁶ See, for example, the report *2022 Public Attitudes on US Intelligence*, published on <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/2022-public-attitudes-us-intelligence>.

on general profiles for general jobs instead of specific profiles for specific jobs. Their offers are still the *take it or leave it* type of proposal. They are not tailor-made, and they should be, not only to convince people to join or to stay, but also to use their talents and predisposition to the full extent possible. That will be at the same time rewarding for people and an incredible added value for the organizations.

Fifthly: fast tracks for fast performers. We do have fast careers, and mine was one of those, but we do not have fast career paths and most of the time it is about luck. I, for one, was lucky. Not even that good. I know many people far more capable than me. They were not that lucky and, therefore, I, and a few other lucky people, were some sort of an odd result of chance. And that should change, because the intelligence and security organizations waste time and lose talent this way. Why wait on predetermined career paths that were designed many years ago for an average or good enough performance? And this, like all the others, has to do more with executive leadership and not really with HR.

Finally, the sixth point: first search inside for the

talent you need and then go outside for the talent you want. This should be a no-brainer, right? Well, it is surprising how many professionals are in this field and how many times their organizations overlook that. For many reasons like the fear that this will deplete entire sections or parts of those services that are less appealing (most of the time because of the management shortcomings, slow career track, low flexibility in work conditions and so on, and not because of the job in itself). Nevertheless, this is not enough, and, for sure it has also to do more with senior leadership than with HR.

In conclusion, the intelligence organizations are rich (look at the impressive pool of talent that already work there) and they have rich organizations' problems. The services are already some of the best HR organizations in the world (have always been and will always be, otherwise they would perform poorly at their job). This is not a war, but just a competition, and the problems that they encounter are most of the time leadership dilemmas and not only HR issues, and... they do have at least six solutions easily available to them that are no more and no less than a Polichinelle secret. No war, just worries.

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