

# Linguistic markers of intuition in Human Resource decisions

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Intuitions are affectively charged judgements that arise automatically and non-consciously. Recognising when intuitive judgements are being used and whether doing so is appropriate is an important skill both for HR practitioners and managers in general who are involved in human resource (HR) processes. Because 'intuiting' is involuntary and unconscious it is difficult to access, monitor and control, however people can access and articulate their intuitive judgements through the spoken/written word. Identifying 'linguistic markers' of intuitions in spoken/written communications could help to identify if/when/how intuition is being used in HR and also to improve HR practices in areas such as selection (for example, by obviating implicit/unconscious biases as a result of the indiscriminate use of intuition) and creativity (for example, articulating and interpreting creative intuitions as a source of insights). This research, published in *Human Resource Management Journal*, used computerised text analysis (CTA) to identify linguistic markers of intuition based on 124 HR practitioners' descriptions of what happens when they 'intuit'. Data were analysed using the 'Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count' (LIWC) software.

The general picture which emerged of how HR practitioners describe their experiences of intuition is as follows (sample words from the LIWC Language Manual for each dimension are given in brackets). The linguistic markers of intuition are words related to: (1) perceptual and bodily processes, i.e. references to bodily feelings (e.g. 'feel', 'sense') and the physical body (e.g. 'body', 'heart'); (2) insight related vocabulary reflecting the complementary cognitive processes of reason (e.g. 'think', 'know') and causation (e.g. 'because', 'effect'); (3) risk (e.g. 'danger', 'doubt') and the seemingly contradictory cognitive processes of tentative (e.g. 'maybe', 'perhaps') with a degree of certainty (e.g. 'sure', 'certain'); (4) present-focus (e.g. 'today', 'is', 'now'); (5) the use of impersonal (e.g. 'it', 'its', 'those') and personal (e.g. 'I', 'my') pronouns; (6) authentic tone, a summary language reflecting the complexity and diversity of speech.

The seemingly ambiguous use of words related to tentativeness and certainty is interesting and perplexing. Regarding authenticity, authentic speech is complex and diverse, whilst inauthentic, including deceptive speech, is characterized by reduced complexity and diversity; these findings suggest that intuitions are expressed with honesty and authenticity.

The practical implication of this is that when HR practitioners are asked to articulate their intuitions they are more likely to use words related to bodily feelings, insight, risk, etc. Potential sources of linguistic markers are practitioners' written and spoken language including emails, interview notes, job descriptions, etc. (written); and in meetings, interviews, training courses, etc. (spoken). To be formally analysed, spoken communication needs to be captured and transcribed for analysis in LIWC.

In the published article we outline some of the implications of these findings for improving HR decision-making processes. For example, in the case of recruitment and selection there is often a stubborn reliance on unstructured interviews and a general reliance on intuition in recruitment and selection. But by unconsciously and intuitively selecting individuals who are like themselves, hiring managers risk violating principles of fairness, justice and equity, and creating an 'echo chamber' for their own beliefs and values. The identification of linguistic markers of intuition in the selection process (for example, in terms of what managers say or write about an applicant) could be one way of obviating such biases. This article explains why and how.



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