

Trust Me: I Am a Recruiter—An Investigation of Antecedents and Consequences of Initial Trust in Online Recruitment



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Abstract Actively searching for potential talent via direct approaches by recruiters in social network sites is increasingly gaining importance. Professional networks enable recruiters to make direct contact with promising candidates for advertised positions. However, the online context always entails an increased risk for participants, especially with regard to the disclosure of personal data and sensitive information, and thus reinforces the need for trust-building mechanisms.

This paper investigates the role of initial trust in the context of online direct approaches via professional networks. Based on the initial trust model, we examined which factors influence how much a candidate trusts an online recruiter. After these factors were incorporated into our model, the effect of initial trust on the candidate's behavioral intention to respond to the online recruiter's message was investigated. We conducted an online questionnaire and recruited participants via social network sites ($N = 264$). The hypothesized relationships were tested using structural equation modeling. Our results indicate positive relationships of the disposition to trust, trust-assuring argument, and structural assurance with the candidate's initial trust in the online recruiter. Finally, the hypothesized positive relationship between initial trust and intention to reply can be confirmed.

Keywords Initial trust · Online recruitment · Social network sites · Passive candidates

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1 Introduction

Today's recruitment landscape is undergoing drastic changes: the times when companies could select the most qualified and suitable candidate from a large number of applicants are long gone. Low birth rates in industrial countries as well as the growing knowledge-based economy have led to a shortage of skilled workers and a war for talent in many industries (Lang et al. 2011; Rushe 2019). The job market has thus seen a shift in equilibrium between the supply and demand curves in a way that has transferred bargaining power from employers to employees (Stone and Deadrick 2015). Human capital has developed into a decisive success factor for companies, and personnel recruitment has thus increased in strategic importance (Wei and JianJu 2018). Focusing on external recruitment, classical personnel recruitment methods are primarily geared towards the recruitment of actively seeking candidates (Breaugh 2013). However, in an increasingly tight talent market, the group of passive candidates, who are not actively looking for a job but would be willing to change jobs (Ployhart et al. 2017), is a promising source of qualified personnel, as this group makes up 70% of the global workforce (Kappel 2018). New strategies for approaching these highly skilled employees and retaining them in the long term must therefore be developed (Melanthiou et al. 2015). In particular, the method of actively searching social network sites (SNS) to identify suitable candidates and contact them about advertised positions represents a lucrative instrument for proactive personnel recruitment (Wei and JianJu 2018). SNS can be defined as web-based services, which enable computer-mediated communication and establishing visible connection to other user, which share the same interests (Melanthiou et al. 2015; Stopfer and Gosling 2013). On the one hand there are SNS as *Facebook* or *Twitter*, which are mainly used for private networking and on the other hand there are specialized, job-related SNS as *LinkedIn* and *XING*, which are particular important in the context of recruitment (Chapman and Gödöllei 2017) and in the following are referred to as professional SNS.

The initial contact between recruiters and candidates has already been investigated and identified as an essential component of a successful recruitment process (Breaugh 2013; Dineen and Williamson 2012). However, due to uncertainties, anonymity, and potential harm, the online context always carries increased risk in any form of interpersonal interaction (Chen and Rea Jr. 2004; Hoffman et al. 1999; McKnight and Chervany 2001; Wang et al. 1998). Concerns about the security and privacy of personal information and the related opportunistic behavior of other network members are particularly relevant in regard to online recruitment via professional SNS (Boyd and Ellison 2007; Grabner-Kräuter 2010; Grabner-Kräuter and Bitter 2015; Li and Bonti 2011; Ridings et al. 2002).

Researcher from the area of Information Systems investigated drivers of the intention to use social networks and found trust as an important antecedent (e.g. Sledgianowski and Kulviwat 2009). Empirical studies show that trust reduces existing uncertainty and complexity, while at the same time, it fosters the willingness of network members to share information and build relationships with other

members (Dwyer et al. 2007; Shin 2010). Sledgianowski and Kulviwat (2009) identified trust as one of the central factors driving the initial use of a SNS as *Facebook* or *MySpace*. Moreover, context-related trust-building factors in the context of SNS have been investigated. For example, Shin (2010) identified users' perceived security and control over their personal information as essential influencing factors of trust in SNS. However, these studies focus on the interaction via SNS in a private context. In our study, we build upon these findings and extend them to the initial contact between online recruiters and candidates via professional SNS. The subject of trust has garnered wide attention among researchers and has been investigated from different perspectives. We build on McKnight et al. (1998) initial trust formation model, as we focus on initial trust between two parties who come into contact for the first time and are thus in the initial phase of their relationship. We suggest that the candidate's initial trust in the online recruiter plays a particular important role, when potential candidates are actively contacted via professional SNS, because it increases the candidate's intention to reply and consequently the chance of actually recruiting a new employee. The recruiter's fundamental understanding of the origin and roots of trust can provide a number of strategically controllable starting points to build up initial trust with candidates and to increase their acceptance of active online recruitment via professional SNS.

In our study, we investigate which factors influence the initial building of trust between candidates and online recruiters and what effect this trust has on a candidate's willingness to reply to the direct contact. Therefore, we conducted an online survey and recruited participants via SNS ($n = 264$) and applied structural equation modeling (SEM). By doing so, we demonstrate how initial trust between candidates and online recruiters can be established and consequently leveraged to attract new employees and strengthen a company's competitive position in the battle for the best talents. Companies, especially recruitment departments, should receive theoretically sound knowledge and practically oriented recommendations for action, which will enable them to develop effective strategies for proactively approaching candidates and successfully recruiting employees.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Initial Trust and Trustworthiness Perception

There is considerable consensus among scientists that trust comprises two components: (1) the willingness to be vulnerable, which in turn is based upon (2) positive expectations about the intentions and behavior of another party (e.g. Fulmer and Gelfand 2012; Mayer et al. 1995; Rousseau et al. 1998). Further trust research, based on social exchange theory, mainly focused on the emergence and development of trust based on interactions in ongoing relationships. This research is based on the assumption that the initial level of trust at zero-acquaintance is zero and gradually develops over time. On the contrary, initial trust research is based on the assumption

that people experience a remarkably high degree of mutual trust from the very beginning of a relationship (Berg et al. 1995; Lewicki and Bunker 1995; McKnight et al. 1998; Meyerson et al. 1996; Rempel et al. 1985). Thus, these two research directions have to be differentiated. Conceptually, initial trust includes trust in a previously unknown trustee. The initial basis of trust between the interaction partners develops within a very short time and is based neither on previous experience nor on substantial information about the other party (Bigley and Pearce 1998; Kim 2012; McKnight et al. 1998; Zhou and Tian 2010).

One of the fundamental concepts of initial trust is elaborated in the work of McKnight et al. (1998). Following the definition by Mayer et al. (1995), the authors define initial trust as (1) the belief in the ability, benevolence, honesty, and predictability of an unknown person and (2) the willingness of an individual to rely on that person. Following on from this understanding of trust, the authors consequently separate trusting belief and trusting intention from each other in the concrete conceptualization of the trust construct, whereby trusting belief involves the trustor's belief that another party is trustworthy, and trusting intention involves the actual willingness to depend on a trustee. In our study, we focus on the candidate's trusting belief in the recruiter's trustworthiness. This belief is grounded on the perception that the other party has one or more characteristics, which are beneficial to oneself (McKnight and Chervany 2001). Thereby the ability, benevolence, and integrity of the trustee have been identified as central characteristics for the trustworthiness belief (Mayer et al. 1995; McKnight et al. 1998). Many other trustworthiness factors examined in the context of empirical trust research can be reconciled with these three dimensions, which is why they also serve as a theoretical basis for the investigation of trust in this paper (Bhattacharjee 2002; Gefen and Straub 2004; McKnight et al. 2002).

Further, we operationalize the intention to reply as trusting intention, as it reflects the trustee's actual trust-based behavioral intentions as a consequence of the perceived trustworthiness. The theory of reasoned action (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) supports the assumption that positive attitudes towards certain behaviors have a positive influence on the behavioral intentions and, ultimately, on the concrete behavior of an individual (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; McKnight et al. 1998; Pavlou 2003). This view is consistent with numerous trust research studies (Gefen 2002; Jarvenpaa et al. 1998; Lu et al. 2010; Mayer et al. 1995; Ridings et al. 2002; Stewart 2003).

Another important contribution of the model of initial trust by McKnight et al. (1998) is the derivation of trust-building factors by integrating fundamentally different research streams within trust research and thus provides a holistic view of initial trust within organizations. For the recruitment context, we highlight three factors, which influence and shape the formation of initial trust in the online recruiter: (1) personal trust disposition of an individual, (2) by cognitive processes, and (3) by specific institutional factors (McKnight et al. 1998). According to assumptions of (1) personality-based trust, initial trust is primarily determined by a person's general tendency to rely on other people (Mayer et al. 1995; McKnight et al. 1998). The tendency to trust is the result of a lifelong process of experience and

socialization of each individual and is therefore to be regarded as a largely constant personality trait (Rotter 1967). In contrast, the (2) cognitive approach to trust research assumes that trust is based on first impressions and cognitive clues, e.g. in the form of logical categorization processes (Lewis and Weigert 1985; Meyerson et al. 1996). According to the (3) institution-based research approach, the existence of structural securities contributes significantly to the perceived trustworthiness of an individual (Shapiro 1987). According to McKnight et al. (1998), all research approaches have in common the peculiarity that they already exist at the beginning of every interpersonal relationship and together they ultimately form the foundation of initial trust.

2.2 Initial Trust Formation in Online Recruitment Via Professional SNS

The topic of hiring the right employees has drawn wide attention among scholars and practitioners, as it is generally accepted that a company's success is closely tied to its human capital (Breaugh 2013). Thus, an efficient and cost-effective recruitment strategy has become an essential competitive advantage. Barber (1998, p. 5) stated that, "Recruitment includes those practices and activities carried on by the organization with the primary purpose of identifying and attracting potential employees." Moreover, recruitment by the influence of communication technology has undergone a revolution over the past 20 years. Traditional practices have been largely replaced with new practices that are referred to as e-recruitment or online recruitment (Allden and Harris 2013; Chapman and Gödöllei 2017).¹ While online recruitment can be conducted by different means as online job boards, mobile recruiting, and gamification (Chapman and Gödöllei 2017), Dineen and colleagues highlighted in several studies the interactive potential of the web and within the interaction the importance of the first contact between the recruiter and the candidate (e.g. Dineen et al. 2002; Dineen and Noe 2009; Dineen and Williamson 2012).

In our study, we specifically focus on the first contact via professional SNS. The usage of SNS as professional SNS is particularly important to increase companies' recognizability, search for and contact new candidates and increase the number of candidates accessed (Melanthiou et al. 2015). Moreover, professional SNS provide the ideal platform to search for high-potential talents. Online recruiter can identify talents via the visible networks of the organization's employees (for example, by searching for former fellow students). In addition, career network users provide in-depth information on their education, previous occupations and skills, allowing recruiters to search for specific profiles (Kluemper and Rosen 2009; Kluemper et al. 2012; Melanthiou et al. 2015).

¹In the following, we use the term online recruitment.

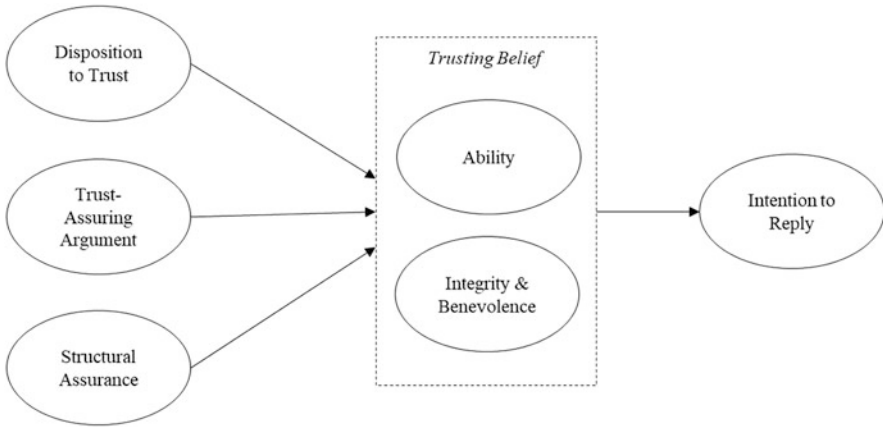


Fig. 1 Proposed research model

We focus on the attraction of external candidates, which further can be distinguished in the two groups of active and passive candidates (for a detailed description see Barber 1998). While recruitment practices by means of websites, online job boards or gamification focus on the group of active candidates, the talent-oriented strategy by actively searching for candidates via professional SNS enables a targeted focus on the acquisition of passive candidates (e.g. Nikolaou 2014; Wei and JianJu 2018). The talent-oriented method requires new skills to successfully fill vacancies, which fundamentally increases the demands on today's personnel managers. A highly developed ability to communicate with both candidates and internal contacts is one of the top requirements of a successful online recruiter. To this end, conclusive arguments must be produced in a discreet and, at the same time, convincing manner that motivates the candidate to respond and ideally to change jobs (Brickwedde 2016).

As mentioned above, building trust can be decisive for a successful first contact in the online recruitment context. Trust-building in the online context differs above all from that in the offline context in the spatial distance and anonymity between the interaction partners (Bhattacharjee 2002; Chellappa and Pavlou 2002; McKnight and Chervany 2001; Yoon 2002). The lack of reliable control mechanisms, the persistent uncertainty regarding privacy and data protection, and the risk of potential opportunistic behavior on the part of interaction partners at the same time renders it difficult to build initial trust (Chen and Rea Jr. 2004; Fung and Lee 1999; Hoffman et al. 1999; McKnight et al. 2002; McKnight and Chervany 2001). Figure 1 presents the underlying research model, which is the foundation of the following empirical study.

Building on a comprehensive conceptual trust model, we empirically investigate the emergence of initial trust in the context of an online direct approach. Specifically, the factors influencing the candidate's initial trust in the online recruiter will be identified, and the effects of the trust gained on candidate behavior will be investigated. The present study design is based on the model of initial trust according to

McKnight et al. (1998). In line with the conceptual work of Grabner-Kräuter (2010), who used the findings of initial trust research to develop an initial trust model in the context of SNS, we adapt the trust-building factors to the recruitment context of professional SNS. Specifically, we include (1) disposition to trust as a personal trust-level construct, (2) trust-assuring argument as a cognitive trust-level construct, and (3) structural assurance as an institutional trust-level construct with respect to the influence of each on initial trust in the online recruiter (McKnight et al. 1998). The trusting belief itself is reflected by the three dimensions of ability, integrity, and benevolence, with the latter two being joined into a combined integrity and benevolence dimension. The fusion of the two constructs can be justified on the basis of the work of McKnight and Chervany (2001), as both imply similar behavior: the trustee wants to do good to the trustor instead of harming him or her (Mayer et al. 1995).

3 Hypothesis Development

As pointed out above, the trusting belief of a candidate in the recruiter's ability, integrity, and benevolence is in the center of our model. An able recruiter is in a position to select a suitable candidate for the company and the advertised position on the basis of the information on professional qualifications and experience provided over professional SNS and to contact him or her in an appropriate manner (McKnight et al. 2002; McKnight and Chervany 2001). As the recruiter is benevolent and of integrity, he will not give false or misleading information to the candidate regarding, for example, expected salary, intended duties, or necessary qualifications. In addition, the candidate's personal and professional information is handled carefully and responsibly, and the desired privacy of each candidate is maintained (McKnight and Chervany 2001; Ridings et al. 2002).

Personality-based trust-building is related to an individual's willingness to rely on others. This willingness is not situation-specific but describes an individual characteristic that accompanies a general, consistent tendency of a person to assess other people as trustworthy (Mayer et al. 1995; McKnight et al. 1998; McKnight and Chervany 2001). The personal inclination to trust affects the perceived trustworthiness of the other, especially when the situation is new and the interaction partner is unknown (Gefen 2000b; Rotter 1971).

The general inclination of a person to trust also determines the assessment of trustworthiness in the context of online interactions. Users with a higher tendency to trust will therefore be less concerned about the dangers of potential data abuse and opportunistic behavior by interaction partners on the internet than users with a lower willingness to trust. Ridings et al. (2002) applied this idea into the context of virtual communities and show that people with a more pronounced disposition to trust build trust in other members of the community more easily than those who are less willing to trust strangers. Lu et al. (2010) in their study on trust in virtual communities also confirm a significantly positive relationship between the willingness to trust and the

perceived trustworthiness of other community members. Thus, it can be assumed that members of an online career network who have a higher disposition to trust initially perceive the trustworthiness of a previously unknown online recruiter to be higher. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H1: Disposition to trust is positively related to the candidate's initial trusting belief regarding the (a) ability and (b) integrity and benevolence of an unknown online recruiter.

In trust research, scholars mostly agree that trust can be based on affections and cognitions (McAllister 1995; Schaubroeck et al. 2007). Affect-based trust refers to trust based on an emotional bond that develops during ongoing relationships. Cognition-based trust arises as a result of the cognitive strategies and processes of interacting individuals (Lewis and Weigert 1985; Meyerson et al. 1996). While initial trust only comprises the initial contact, affections develop through ongoing relationships. Thus, it can be assumed that affect-based trust plays a subordinate role in the initial trust formation (McKnight et al. 2002). Existing research has investigated different sub-dimensions of cognition-based trust. In this respect, McKnight et al. (1998) consider the classification of the interaction partner in certain groups or according to certain stereotypes as well as the assessment of the counterpart based on general reputation to be central components of cognition-based trust. In their study on trust in the online context, Kim et al. (2004) determine that the quality of product information provided on an online provider's website is an essential component of cognition-based trust and an important influencing factor of trust in the transaction partner.

Applied to the specific context of online direct approaching, a candidate's trust in an unknown online recruiter is based on the first information and indications provided during the initial contact. Accordingly, candidates are likely to pay particular attention to the quality of the message, which is the first point of contact between the candidate and online recruiter. The trustworthiness of the online recruiter should therefore be conveyed in a target-oriented and convincing way via the information in the message.

Within the framework of this study, the trust-assuring argument construct is identified as a sub-dimension of cognition-based trust (Kim and Benbasat 2003, 2006). Based on Toulmin (1958) model of argumentation, Kim and Benbasat (2003) define trust-assuring argument in the online context as a targeted argumentation that helps to structure and comprehensively address consumers' trust concerns with regard to online transactions, consequently reducing concerns. Based on this definition, the trust-assuring argument construct in the present context of online direct approach involves a conclusive argumentation structure within the initial message, consisting of an assertion and further supporting explanations, to reduce the candidate's uncertainties with regard to the recruiter's perceived trustworthiness—i.e., ability, integrity, and benevolence. It seems logical that individuals are more inclined to accept claims backed by supporting statements and arguments than those claims that are not supported by any evidence (Toulmin 1958).

A conclusive and convincing first approach message, in which an online recruiter cites targeted arguments regarding the suitability of the selected candidate for the

advertised position, demonstrates that the online recruiter has sufficient expertise to effectively identify and acquire potential candidates. Furthermore, a credible argument can also highlight the benevolent intentions of an online recruiter. Uncertainties regarding the opportunistic behavior of the online recruiter are thus reduced, and perceived trustworthiness is positively influenced. In their study on the influence of trust-assuring arguments on consumer confidence in online transactions, Kim and Benbasat (2003, 2006) conclude that such arguments increase confidence in online providers. In addition, the results confirm a positive effect between the intensity of the design of arguments on trust-related issues and consumer trust in online transactions. Accordingly, strongly argued assertions have a positive influence on trust, while assertions that are not supported by further arguments have no influence on consumer confidence (Kim and Benbasat 2003, 2006). Accordingly, the following hypothesis is tested:

H2: Trust assuring arguments are positively related to the candidate's initial trusting belief regarding the (a) ability and (b) integrity and benevolence of an unknown online recruiter.

Existing research on institutional trust also points to perceived structural assurance as a further trust-building mechanism: initiated by the existence of non-personal structures such as guarantees, contracts or rating systems, confidence arises from the sense of control and security of an individual in a particular situation and environment (Kim 2012; McKnight et al. 2002; McKnight and Chervany 2001). Applied to the online context, perceived structural security refers to the conviction that the legal and technological framework conditions of the internet in general or a platform in particular ensure a secure and controlled flow of online transactions (McKnight et al. 2002; McKnight and Chervany 2001). Finally, the perceived control and protection mechanisms help to reduce uncertainties in the context of risky online transactions, thereby enhancing trust in the interaction partner (Kim et al. 2004; McKnight et al. 2002; McKnight and Chervany 2001). McKnight et al. (1998) argue that structural security influences the perceived trustworthiness of the unknown counterpart, especially in the initial phase of an interpersonal relationship, since at this point, the available information about the interaction partner is low and largely incomplete.

In the context of active online recruitment, structural assurance refers to an individual's belief that interactions with other network members—and consequently with an unknown online recruiter—are controlled by the legal and technological framework prevailing in professional SNS and that established data protection guarantees and security measures prevent potential data and identity abuse (McKnight et al. 2002). In their study on trust in the context of virtual communities, Wu and Tsang (2008) examine the importance of monitoring and control mechanisms as well as data protection guarantees and conclude that perceived structural assurance makes a significant contribution to building trusting relationships between members in virtual networks (Wu and Tsang 2008). Based on the above argumentation, it can therefore be assumed that perceived structural assurance is positively related to a candidate's initial trust in the online recruiter in professional SNS. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is tested:

H3: Structural assurance is positively related to the candidate's initial trusting belief regarding the (a) ability and (b) integrity and benevolence of an unknown online recruiter.

In situations where the behavior of unknown interaction partners is difficult to assess, trust conveys a sense of control. Existing uncertainties are thereby reduced and the behavioral intentions of an individual in an online context are positively influenced (Pavlou 2003; Reichheld and Scheffer 2000). In the context of virtual communities, the behavioral intention of the members is increased by trusting other community members. Here, trust primarily affects the willingness of an individual to share or receive (personal) information with other community members (Grabner-Kräuter 2010; Grabner-Kräuter and Bitter 2015; Lu et al. 2010; Ridings et al. 2002).

In the context of an online direct approach, trust in the ability, integrity, and benevolence of an online recruiter should thus increase candidates' intention to respond to the recruiter's message. Candidates are therefore more likely to respond to an online recruiter if they feel that the online recruiter has the necessary skills to select a suitable employee for the vacancy based on his or her professional experience and qualifications. Similarly, selected candidates will be more willing to exchange information if they can trust in the integrity and benevolence of the online recruiter—i.e., if they do not fear opportunistic behavior on the part of the unknown interaction partner (Ridings et al. 2002). If a positive relationship between a candidate's trust and intention to respond is established, the candidate's response intention can be confirmed as a trust-based behavior that results from the candidate's initial trust in the online recruiter (McKnight et al. 2002). Thus, the following hypothesis is tested:

H4: The candidate's initial trusting belief regarding the (a) ability and (b) integrity and benevolence of an unknown online recruiter is positively related to the candidate's intention to respond.

4 Methods

4.1 Material

We used a survey-based design and combined it with some quasi-experimental methods. The participants were asked to imagine that they were members of a career network and that detailed information about the employment history and their key abilities were given. Then they were asked to imagine they got contacted by a personally unknown online recruiter. The type of message the participants then received was the experimental manipulation. In the first condition they received a generic message saying that they would fit in very well with the organization, a short info about the prospective organization and that the online recruiter would answer further questions (e.g. "Your profile caught our attention, we are convinced you would be a great fit for our organization."). The second condition was more elaborate. In addition to the exact same wording as the first condition the message

included information linking the keywords from the candidate's profile to the organizations needs and showcased how they fit together (e.g. "Your profile says you're a team-player and reliable. That is the kind of qualities we seek at our organization. With your background we are convinced you would be an asset for our organization."). The detailed description can be seen in Appendix A.

4.2 *Sample and Participants*

Participants were recruited via SNS. An initial sample of 345 participants was recruited. Participation was voluntary. Due to extreme answer time (more than 2 SDs above or below the mean) the data of 49 participants was deleted. Therefore, the sample size for the final analysis is 296. Participants were almost equally distributed across conditions, with 149 persons facing the first scenario and 147 for the second scenario. Of the respondents, 60.9% were female. Overall, the age of the participants varied between 21 and 69 years, with an average age of 33.54 years. At the time of the survey, 24.4% of the participants held a management position. The majority of those surveyed ($n = 128$) had up to five years of professional experience. There were no significant differences in demographics across the two conditions.

4.3 *Operationalization of Constructs*

All constructs were measured on a 7-point Likert scale. All scales were based on previous measures to ensure accuracy of measurement (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994) and carefully translated to German.

Disposition to Trust was measured with five items based on Gefen (2000a), and *Structural Assurance* was measured with three items based on McKnight et al. (2002) and Chai and Kim (2012). Moreover, the items were adapted to the study's context (e.g. "Online professional SNS have enough safeguards to make me feel comfortable using it to publish my personal profile information.")

To test the effect of the trust-assuring argument, participants were equally distributed to one of two scenarios. In the first scenario, a recruiter gave participants a convincing text that elaborated reasons why the candidate was a good fit for the advertised position. Participants in the second scenario were shown a message that included no reasons.

We based our items for initial trustworthiness for both ability as well as integrity and benevolence on McKnight et al. (2002). The items were slightly adapted to fit in with the study's context (e.g. "I believe that the online recruiter would act in my best interest." or "The online recruiter is competent and effective in contacting potential candidates.") Finally, *Intention to Reply* was measured using three items (Pavlou and

Gefen 2004), which were adapted as well (e.g. “It is likely that I will actually respond to the online recruiter’s message.”)

5 Results

5.1 Descriptives

The descriptives of the final sample are displayed in the Appendix B (Table 1). The Average Variance extracted (AVE) was highest for intention to reply, with 0.910, and lowest for Disposition to trust, with 0.634. All α -values were higher than 0.7. All variables had variance inflation factors smaller than 3, suggesting little impact of multicollinearity (see also Table 1). The final model yielded good to medium fit (chi-squared = 545.483, df = 199, RMSEA = 0.058; GFI = 0.868; AGFI = 0.832; CFI = 0.965; NFI = 0.933) (Hair et al. 2014).

5.2 Hypotheses

The individual disposition to trust shows a significant positive relationship with trust in both the ability of the recruiter ($\beta = 0.196$; $p < 0.001$) and the integrity and benevolence of the recruiter ($\beta_{1b} = 0.253$; $p < 0.001$), with the effect being stronger for integrity and benevolence. Thus, Hypothesis 1a, which predicted a positive relationship between disposition to trust and ability and Hypothesis 1b, which predicted a positive relationship between disposition to trust and integrity and benevolence can be supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted a positive relationship between trust-assuring arguments and trust in both the abilities (2a) and the integrity and benevolence (2b). As we found significant positive relationships between trust-assuring argument and trust in both the abilities ($\beta = 0.310$; $p < 0.001$) and the integrity and benevolence of the online recruiter ($\beta = 0.254$; $p < 0.001$) both H2a and H2b can be supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicted a positive relationship between structural assurance and trust in both the abilities (3a) and the integrity and benevolence (3b). While structural assurance shows a significant positive relationship with trust in the integrity and benevolence of the online recruiter ($\beta = 0.278$; $p < 0.001$), we did not find a significant ($\beta = 0.083$; $p = 0.147$) relationship between trust-assuring argument and perceived ability of the online recruiter. H3b can therefore be supported, while H3a cannot be supported.

With regard to the consequences of the perceived trustworthiness of the online recruiter, both perceived ability ($\beta = 0.531$; $p < 0.001$) and perceived integrity and benevolence ($\beta = 0.251$; $p < 0.001$) were positively linked to the candidate’s intention to respond, supporting Hypotheses 4a and 4b. Trust in the ability of the online recruiter was stronger linked to the candidate’s intention to respond than trust

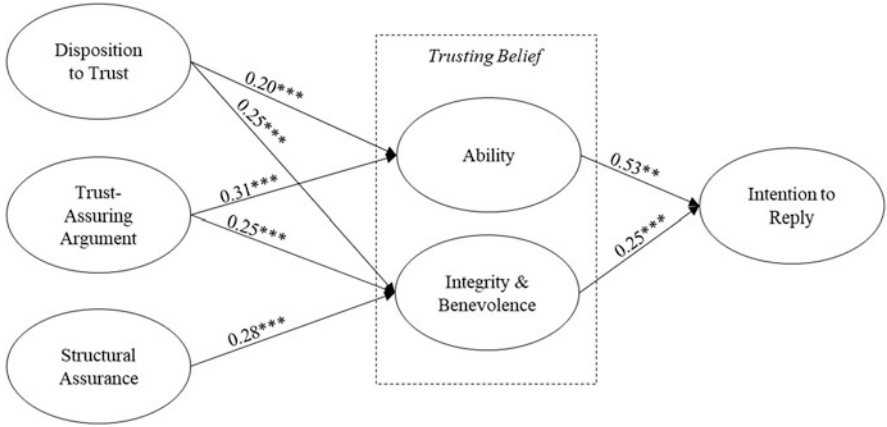


Fig. 2 Results: *Note:* RMSEA: 0.058; GFI: 0.868; AGFI: 0.832; NFI: 0.933; CFI: 0.966. * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

in the integrity and benevolence of the online recruiter. The results are illustrated in Fig. 2.

6 Discussion

The aim of our study was to examine trust-building factors in the context of directly approaching potential candidates via professional SNS, as the emergence of initial trust in the first contact is essential for recruitment success. The assumption can be confirmed that a complex interplay of different scientifically founded trends in trust research forms the basis for the initial trust-building between so far unconnected parties. Following the model of initial trust according to McKnight et al. (1998), this study integrates mechanisms of personality-, institution-, and cognition-based trust. All trust-building mechanisms have a positive relationship with the trustworthiness perception of an online recruiter and thus the trusting belief in the online recruiter. The results show that the two dimensions, namely, (1) ability and (2) integrity and benevolence, are influenced not only by concrete interpersonal interactions (trust-assuring argument) but also by individual inclinations (disposition to trust) and institutional framework factors (structural assurance). Further, it is shown that a candidate decides to trust based on various situation-specific attributes and environmental influences instead of generally being trusting or not trusting. Last, we find a strong relationship between the trusting belief in an online recruiter and the candidate's intention to reply. The perceived ability of the online recruiter seems to be more decisive for the intention to reply than his or her benevolence and integrity.

With regard to the anticipated interrelationships, first, a significant positive relationship between the individual's disposition to trust and trusting belief in the

online recruiter is established. Related to the context of proactive direct approach by recruiters via professional SNS, this correlation means that candidates who are generally more inclined to trust other people also show more trust in an online recruiter who is unknown to them. In the inherently risky online context, they are therefore less concerned about the dangers of potential data misuse and other opportunistic behaviors on the part of their interaction partner. The significant relevance of the disposition to trust construct for the existing model is not surprising, since the situation is unfamiliar for the selected candidates and the online recruiter is unknown. The perceived trustworthiness therefore is based on the candidate's individual inclination to rely on others and is the result of a complex, lifelong process of experience and socialization (Gefen and Straub 2004). While the finding of a positive relationship between disposition to trust and trusting belief is in line with numerous studies on trust in e-commerce (Gefen 2000a; Kim et al. 2004; McKnight et al. 2002; Mittendorf 2016), explicit results in the specific context of virtual communities and online social networks can only be found to a limited extent in the literature. Ridings et al. (2002) identify the disposition to trust construct as a notable influencing factor of the perceived abilities as well as integrity and benevolence of other members in virtual communities. A more detailed examination of the results confirms that the trust-building mechanism of the disposition to trust construct has a relatively low influence on the perceived trustworthiness of an online recruiter compared to the other mechanisms integrated in the model. One possible reason for this could be the significant influences of the other two trust-building mechanisms. Whereas disposition to trust is an overarching tendency, situation-specific and perceptible mechanisms, such as writing to a candidate, allow concrete conclusions to be drawn about the character of the online recruiter and consequently exert a stronger influence on his or her perceived trustworthiness.

Second, we identify the features of initial contact as a key success factor for effectively recruiting potential candidates via professional SNS (Brickwedde 2013). The positive relationship between the trust-assuring argument and the perceived trustworthiness of the online recruiter must be emphasized, particularly with regard to the practical implication of the research results. A well-structured message, which, with the help of a targeted and convincing argumentation structure, shows why the candidate appears suitable for the advertised position and as a potential employee of the company, promotes not only the perceived ability but also the perceived integrity and benevolence of an unknown online recruiter. By means of an argumentation that is logically comprehensible for the candidate, the online recruiter proves in particular his knowledge of the concrete task area, the necessary professional prerequisites and the desirable conceptual abilities of a potential candidate. It is therefore not surprising that the effect of trust-assuring argument on the perceived abilities of an online recruiter is stronger than the influence on his perceived integrity and benevolence. Comprehensible arguments enable the candidate to make a well-founded and comprehensive assessment of the trustworthiness of the unknown recruiter. Any uncertainties regarding opportunistic behavior on the part of the online recruiter are thus reduced, and the individual's willingness to interact with the network member with whom they were previously unconnected is promoted. The findings of this study are

consistent with those of existing studies in trust research on the relationship between the quality of information provided and trust in the online context (Fung and Lee 1999; Kim et al. 2004; Mukherjee and Nath 2003; Nicolaou and McKnight 2006). Kim et al. (2004) identify, for example, the quality of the information on product offerings and transaction rules on an online provider's website as an essential trust-building factor for successful e-commerce transactions. Additionally, Yi et al. (2013) identify the quality of the argumentation structure in sensitive online information as a significant influencing factor of trust, while Kim and Benbasat (2003, 2006) also confirm a positive relationship between the provision of trustworthy arguments and trust in the online provider. Accordingly, strong argument-based messages, in contrast to shorter claims, have a positive relationship with perceived trustworthiness. The present study shows that the building of a candidate's confidence in an unknown online recruiter in the context of professional SNS is influenced not only by the provision of specific information—e.g. about the company, future areas of responsibility and desirable skills of a potential employee—but also by the logical structuring and preparation of this information. Building on Toulmin (1958) argumentation model, this study also proposes a clearly defined and scientifically sound method for the efficient argumentative design of an online direct approach, which can be used by companies and online recruiters to develop convincing arguments in the context of initial direct approaches and thus gain the trust of potential candidates.

Third, in line with earlier findings from initial trust research, we find that perceived structural assurance influences a candidate's trusting belief in an online recruiter. The construct, which reflects the environmental and structural perceptions of a candidate during interactions over professional SNS, captures the influence of a specific online environment on the perceived trustworthiness of an interaction partner within this environment. In the context of professional SNS, users have a number of potential uncertainties and concerns about the security of sensitive information and personal data. The uncertainty of many users represents a barrier to interaction with other network members (Shin 2010). Increasing perceived structural assurance can therefore effectively reduce concerns about data misuse and opportunistic behavior by unknown network members and increase trust in other interaction partners. Established monitoring and security measures of professional SNS make it possible to prevent unwanted or even unauthorized behavior on the part of other members and allow those members who are more concerned than others about online transactions to interact with unknown participants. Compared to the other trust-building mechanisms integrated in the model, structural assurance has the strongest influence on the perceived integrity and benevolence of the online recruiter. The results are consistent with findings from related research areas such as trust in e-commerce or in virtual communities (McKnight et al. 2002; Pavlou and Gefen 2004; Wu and Tsang 2008). The finding that the relationship between structural assurance and the perceived ability of the online recruiter is positive but statistically non-significant is contrary to the work of Lu et al. (2010), who found a significant interrelationship between structural assurance and trust in the abilities of other network members in virtual communities. A possible explanation for the insignificant relationship could be that the perceived technological and legal

structures in professional SNS do not allow conclusions to be drawn about the personal characteristics of the online recruiter—in this case, his or her specific professional competencies and abilities. However, perceived structural security essentially contributes to strengthening network members' confidence in an unknown online recruiter.

Fourth, our results indicate that trust in the online recruiter is an important determinant for the willingness of a candidate to react to the recruiter's direct approach and to respond—in the best case, positively—to his inquiry. Here, the behavioral intention of an identified candidate is significantly influenced by both the online recruiter's perceived abilities and perceived integrity and benevolence. In particular, the perceived abilities of an unknown online recruiter seem to be of highest relevance: the online recruiter has to convince a selected candidate of his or her professional knowledge and methodical competence so that the candidate is more likely to reply and the sourcing can be successful. Findings from related areas such as trust in e-commerce or in virtual communities are in line with those of the specific application case of online recruitment presented here, thus meaningfully complementing other existing research (Gefen 2000a, 2002; McKnight et al. 2002; Pavlou and Gefen 2004; Ridings et al. 2002; Shin 2010). By validating the relevance of initial trust in influencing a candidate's intention to interact, trust can thus be identified as a strategic success factor of effective online direct contact, enabling companies to attract new employees and retain them for the long term.

7 Practical Implications

Organizations should be aware of the tremendous importance of trust in the context of an effective online direct approach and the factors that influence trust. In the battle for the best talent, companies need to take differentiated action to strengthen different trust-building factors and build a strong foundation of trust between candidates and online recruiters. The risk of an unsuccessful candidate approach and the misuse of trust already generated in a candidate through, for example, false promises or opportunistic behavior should not be underestimated by the online recruiter. Especially in the initial phase, the generated basis of trust is very fragile and unstable. Once destroyed, it is difficult to rebuild (Lewicki and Bunker 1996). Initial trust can therefore be identified as a critical and highly sensitive key factor for a successful online direct approach, and it must be influenced and controlled by means of targeted measures not only to attract talent in the short term but also to retain it in the long term.

Regarding the role of disposition to trust in a candidate's trust in an online recruiter, it can be stated that there are no means or measures that companies and their responsible online recruiters can take to directly influence this personal tendency. As a result of a lifelong development and socialization process, the tendency of an individual to trust others is firmly anchored in his or her personality and largely stable towards external factors (Fukuyama 1995; Gefen and Straub 2004; Mayer

et al. 1995; McKnight et al. 1998; McKnight and Chervany 2001; Rotter 1971). Implications for successful recruiting can, however, be derived from any cultural differences in individual willingness to trust; for example, the openness of people in the USA to proactively approach candidates is much greater than that of people in Europe (Ferrin and Gillespie 2010). This circumstance is of great relevance above all for internationally active organizations. Companies and their commissioned online recruiters must therefore adapt to a varying willingness to trust and accept the proactive direct approach method in different cultural circles. In companies in which directly approaching potential candidates is less widespread, necessary measures should therefore be taken to promote awareness of this method and to sustainably increase the willingness of potential candidates to trust it.

Practical implications for effectively approaching and securing long-term commitment from potential candidates are provided by the results, especially with regard to the positive relationship between the argumentative design of the message and trust in the online recruiter. Companies should be aware of the effect of a message individually tailored to the candidate profile and make all necessary factual and temporal resources available to their online recruiters to engage in intensive candidate search and secure a promising response to a direct approach. The technical and methodological know-how of online recruiters should be continuously elaborated, updated, and further developed within the framework of regular training courses and further education.

In addition, companies and online recruiters should also consider the importance of the perceived structural assurance of professional SNS in their online recruitment strategy. Especially for the choice of the appropriate sourcing channel, the network security factor seems to be of enormous relevance, as it has a lasting influence on the perceived trustworthiness of the online recruiter and candidates' willingness to interact with him or her. Companies should therefore select the appropriate recruiting channel not only according to the accessibility of the relevant target group but also, in particular, with a view to the established technological and legal structures within the favored online channel. Comprehensive research on the data protection guidelines and security standards prevailing in the career network prior to approaching candidates enables online recruiters to make a well-founded assessment of the established technological and legal structures, which should provide the network members with the necessary security for interactions with other (unknown) participants.

Finally, the results also provide input for the practice of successful direct approaches with regard to the response intention of a candidate. First, it should be noted that the pure intention of a candidate to respond to the online recruiter's direct approach does not provide any evidence of his or her actual interest in the job advertisement. Consequently, it cannot be ruled out that a selected candidate will give a negative response to the online recruiter since he or she is not currently looking for a job or the advertised position does not meet his or her personal expectations. The trust placed in the online recruiter nevertheless suggests that the candidate has a general interest in new challenges and exciting job offers. Therefore, it is highly recommended that a candidate who responds to a direct approach be

included in the company's talent pool. The gained basis of trust between company and candidate can thus be maintained and cultivated in the long term against the background of future job advertisements.

8 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides insights in a largely neglected area of practical importance, some limitations should be noted. First, the data were collected cross-sectionally. While we followed the recommendations by Spector (2019) for optimizing our design and our quasi-experimental approach minimized this bias, this remains an issue. One further limitation refers to the generalizability of the results. Although the data were obtained from employees working in a variety of different industries and organizations, we cannot exclude potential bias here. The reason for this is that, although administering a web survey entailed advantages that made it the preferred survey method, it may also have caused two issues in particular: undercoverage and self-selection (Bethlehem 2010; Schonlau et al. 2009). Moreover, the study was done with predominantly Germans who were recruited via SNS. Future research should try to validate our first findings in different contexts, including different linguistic, cultural, economic, and job role contexts.

From a statistical stance, the fit of the final model was not ideal, violating the standard thresholds of several fit indices (GFI: 0.868; AGFI: 0.832). It should be noted, however, that the fit was acceptable (RMSEA: 0.058; NFI: 0.933) to good (CFI: 0.966) on other fit indices and that ideal fit is seldom seen in actual empirical data (Hu and Bentler 1998, 1999). Furthermore, a mediation model could be tested to investigate possible indirect effects. Future research should focus on whether candidates' trust in an online recruiter can also strengthen the perceived trustworthiness of the specific platform on which the online direct approach takes place. The result could provide interesting insights into the meaningfulness and impact of possible cooperation between companies and professional SNS—e.g., in the form of attractive advertising and recruitment campaigns.

With regard to the relatively low explanatory power of the trust-building factors, further trust-building factors should be taken into account in future studies. Particularly with regard to the relevance of the perceived abilities of an online recruiter, it can be assumed that the personal information and professional experience of the online recruiter provided on the career network have an influence on the trustworthiness perceived by the candidate. In this regard, Yi et al. (2013), in a study on trust in online information, find that the credibility of informants exerts a significant influence on trust in the information provided by them. The influence of the size and reputation of the recruiting company on the perceived trustworthiness of the online recruiter is also outside the scope of the present study design. Existing studies from related areas such as e-commerce confirm the relevance of these and similar factors for gaining trust (Bart et al. 2005; Jarvenpaa et al. 2000; Koufaris and Hampton-Sosa 2003).

9 Conclusion

The study focused on the role of initial trust in online recruitment through direct approaches of possible candidates by examining which factors influence the emergence of trust and how the trust gained finally affects the candidate's behavioral intention to reply. The objective of the study was to provide a theoretical and practical approach that would enable companies to derive effective strategies for proactively approaching candidates and successfully recruiting employees to strengthen their competitive position in the battle for the best talents.

The results suggested that the trusting belief in the online recruiter is determined by the three factors: disposition to trust, trust-assuring argument, and structural assurance. In particular, we find the argumentative design of the message as a central success factor of an effective online direct approach, significantly influencing the perceived abilities of an online recruiter and consequently the candidate's initial trust. Finally, we show that initial trust has an effect on the behavioral intention of a candidate. Thus, above all, it is the perceived abilities of the online recruiter that contribute to a candidate's willingness to react to the online direct approach and to respond to the online recruiter's request.

Appendix A: Scenarios According to Toulmin (1958)

Please read the following text carefully.

Put yourself in the following fictitious situation:

You have a user profile in an online career network. The profile contains in addition to your personal skills, details of your previous professional experience and current employment. From one of you personally unknown online recruiter you will receive the following message:

Scenario 1

Good afternoon,

We have become aware of your profile and are convinced that exactly you fit to our company!

My name is Jonas Mayer and I work as a Talent Scout for MHW Consulting Group in Münster. As a management consultancy with industry-specific know-how and practice-proven methods we accompany our customers from strategy development through to operational implementation.

In case we have aroused your interest, I am available as your personal contact person for further details about the position and our company.

I look forward to your feedback.

Best regards,

Jonas Mayer

MHW Consulting Group | Human Resource Management

E-Mail: J.Mayer@MHWConsulting.com

Mobile: +49 178 7314312

Scenario 2

Good afternoon,

Your profile indicates that you are ambitious, reliable, a team player, responsible and have already gained experience in the field of management consulting. Therefore, we have become aware of your profile and we are convinced that you are a perfect match for our company!

My name is Jonas Mayer and I work as a Talent Scout for MHW Consulting Group in Münster. As a management consultancy with industry-specific know-how and practice-proven methods we accompany our customers from strategy development through to operational implementation.

We are looking for highly motivated and talented candidates who are prepared to take on responsibility from the very beginning and to grow with challenging tasks. Reliability and the ability to work in a team characterize each of our employees. With your outstanding academic career, your previous experience in management consulting and your conceptual skills, you would ideally complement our company and our team.

In case we have aroused your interest, I am available as your personal contact person for further details about the position and our company.

I look forward to your feedback.

Best regards,

Jonas Mayer

MHW Consulting Group | Human Resource Management

E-Mail: J.Mayer@MHWCConsulting.com

Mobile: +49 178 7314312

Appendix B

Table 1 Reliability and validity of latent variables

Construct	Mean	SD	λ	AEV	α
Disposition to trust	4.15	1.45	0.91	0.63	0.89
	3.99	1.39	0.71		
	4.12	1.42	0.79		
	3.85	1.31	0.76		
	4.73	1.48	0.80		
Structural assurance	4.07	1.44	0.94	0.84	0.94
	4.01	1.40	0.91		
	3.98	1.48	0.90		
Integrity and benevolence	3.60	1.40	0.83	0.75	0.95
	3.79	1.50	0.76		
	3.23	1.40	0.80		
	3.64	1.38	0.94		
	3.59	1.35	0.94		
	4.01	1.40	0.84		
	3.51	1.34	0.93		
Ability	4.00	1.57	0.96	0.89	0.97
	4.01	1.62	0.95		
	4.08	1.52	0.93		
	4.02	1.58	0.93		
Intention to reply	4.26	1.76	0.93	0.91	0.97
	3.99	1.84	0.97		
	3.96	1.82	0.97		

Note. *SD* standard deviation, λ standardized factor loading, *AEV* average extracted variance, α Cronbach's α

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