

Between Acceptance and Skepticism: Human Resources Professionals' Sensemaking of Artificial Intelligence in Recruitment

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Abstract

The increasing diffusion of artificial intelligence in recruitment has attracted considerable scholarly and practical attention, while the ways in which human resources (HR) professionals subjectively interpret and integrate these technologies into their professional practice remain insufficiently understood. Against this background, the present study investigates how HR professionals make sense of artificial intelligence use in recruitment while navigating an enduring tension between acceptance and skepticism. Methodologically, the study adopts a constructivist-interpretive research design grounded in Weick's sensemaking framework. Eleven semi-structured expert interviews with HR professionals from Germany and Austria were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, complemented by a theory-guided interpretive sensemaking analysis. The findings identify six overarching sensemaking patterns: identity protection, retrospective key moments, active co-creation of uncertainty, social embeddedness, sustained ambivalence, and plausibility-seeking through metaphor. These patterns condense into four participant-anchored interpretive types: Guardians, Wait-and-Seers, Cautious Integrators, and Full Integrators. Professional identity emerged as the central interpretive frame shaping participants' evaluations of artificial intelligence. Furthermore, the study suggests that acceptance does not arise solely through conviction but may also develop through a provisional, habituation-like process conceptually distinct from quality updating and social normalization. These findings carry important implications for the governance of artificial intelligence-supported recruitment processes. From a practical perspective, the study highlights the importance of identity-sensitive change management, structured spaces for reflection, staged experimentation, and mandatory critical-review mechanisms aimed at preventing the habituation-like erosion of human oversight. The study contributes to the emerging literature at the intersection of sensemaking, professional identity, and artificial intelligence acceptance in recruitment, while extending existing acceptance research by foregrounding a provisional, habituation-like pathway of adoption within the legally and culturally distinctive context of German-speaking countries.

Categories: Strategic Human Resource Management, Organisational Behavior

Keywords: artificial intelligence, recruitment, sensemaking, technology acceptance, qualitative content analysis, constructivist research, human resource management

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming human resource management (HRM), and nowhere is this transformation more visible than in recruitment. Intelligent applicant tracking systems, AI-driven sourcing tools, and automated pre-screening technologies promise efficiency gains, reduced time-to-hire, and more objective candidate evaluations ([Cappelli et al., 2018](#)) ([Dutta and Naveen, 2026](#)). Yet, empirical evidence consistently reveals a striking gap between perceived potential and actual adoption. Industry survey data suggest that approximately 38 per cent of employers regard AI as highly relevant to recruitment, while fewer than 18 per cent currently deploy such tools ([Groß and Staff,](#)

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2024). These figures align with peer-reviewed findings, with Böhm et al. documenting widespread positive attitudes coexisting with limited implementation in German organizations (Böhm et al., 2024), while Horodyski reports comparable gaps across European recruiter samples (Horodyski, 2023).

Existing scholarship has primarily approached AI adoption through classical technology acceptance frameworks such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989), focusing on perceived usefulness and ease of use. While these models have generated important insights, they treat acceptance as a largely rational, evaluative process and pay insufficient attention to the interpretive and identity-laden nature of how professionals make sense of new technologies (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008) (Kieran et al., 2022). This gap is particularly pronounced in recruitment, where human judgement, empathy, and relational sensitivity are central professional values.

This study addresses that gap from a constructivist-interpretive standpoint, drawing on Weick's sensemaking framework (Weick, 1988) (Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking describes how individuals construct plausible interpretations of novel, ambiguous, or disruptive phenomena in order to remain capable of action. AI in recruitment is precisely such a phenomenon. The primary audience for this study is HRM scholars and qualitative researchers interested in AI adoption and digital transformation, as well as practitioners designing AI implementation processes. The research question is: How do HR professionals interpret the use of AI in recruitment in the tension between acceptance and skepticism?

A constructivist-interpretive qualitative design is particularly well suited to this question because the phenomenon of interest (i.e., subjective sensemaking of AI) is constituted through the perspectives and experiences of those involved, resists reduction to numerical variables, and requires the kind of open-ended, inductive exploration that qualitative methods afford (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The study makes three contributions: it extends sensemaking theory in HRM by developing a participant-anchored typology of four interpretive types and specifying how depth of active co-authorship, rather than role status, differentiates them; it proposes a provisional, habituation-like pathway to AI acceptance conceptually distinct from quality updating and social normalization, advanced as an interpretive hypothesis in need of longitudinal confirmation; and it provides actionable guidance for organizations in a legally and institutionally distinctive context.

Literature review

AI in Recruitment

AI in recruitment encompasses a broad spectrum of technologies, from natural language processing for résumé screening and candidate matching to conversational AI chatbots and algorithmic video interview analysis (Cappelli et al., 2018) (Revillod, 2025). Proponents argue that these tools can accelerate high-volume screening, reduce individual cognitive bias, and free recruiters for higher-value relational activities (Pan et al., 2022) (Roppelt et al., 2024). However, AI-driven hiring tools can encode and amplify existing biases (Kelan, 2024) (Rigotti and Fosch-Villaronga, 2024), and algorithmic opacity remains a persistent barrier to adoption (Hofeditz et al., 2022) (Asif, 2024). The EU AI Act classifies recruitment AI as high-risk, mandating human oversight, transparency, and systematic risk management (European Parliament and Council, 2024).

The predominantly German sample warrants explicit consideration of the German institutional context. In Germany, the Works Constitution Act (Betriebsverfassungsgesetz, BetrVG) provides works councils with substantial participation and co-determination rights concerning personnel selection procedures, assessment principles, and certain technology-based workplace systems. Together with the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and a comparatively strong emphasis on data protection and employee representation, this institutional environment may constitute not merely a contextual backdrop but a co-constitutive element of how HR professionals make sense of AI-based decision support. Similarly, Horodyski finds that German-speaking recruiters display a particularly cautious orientation toward AI tools (Horodyski, 2023). A small number of participants in the present study were based in Austria, where employee participation is governed by the Austrian Labour Constitution Act (Arbeitsverfassungsgesetz, ArbVG), which likewise provides works councils with information, consultation, and, under specific conditions, consent rights regarding technological systems, while differing from the German regulatory framework in its specific provisions. Accordingly, the institutional interpretation advanced here applies most directly to the German context represented by the majority of the

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sample and should not be generalized to the German-speaking region as a whole. Future cross-national research should therefore treat institutional and regulatory regimes as analytical variables rather than as incidental background conditions.

Technology Acceptance and Its Limits

Classical technology acceptance research, anchored in the TAM (Davis, 1989) and Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh et al., 2003), models adoption as primarily a function of perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and social influence. These frameworks have been applied to AI-supported recruitment specifically, where perceived usefulness, fairness, and transparency emerge as salient predictors (Laurim et al., 2021) (Asif, 2024) (Revillod, 2025). Their strength lies in parsimony and measurability. Yet, TAM-based approaches inadequately capture the socially constructed, identity-laden dimensions of professional engagement with technologies that touch the core of occupational self-concept (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). Research in adjacent professional domains (e.g., radiology, journalism, auditing) shows that practitioners' responses to AI are deeply shaped by professional identity, status anxieties, and collective occupational norms (Goto, 2022).

A further limitation concerns the assumption of rational evaluation. Familiarity and habituation may generate a form of de facto acceptance that bypasses explicit cost-benefit reasoning (Carter et al., 2022) (Goto, 2022). This potential habituation pathway is conceptually distinct from (a) quality updating, where reduced scrutiny reflects genuine improvement in AI outputs; and (b) social normalization, where peer behavior drives adoption independently of individual evaluation. The distinction matters for governance design and is explored empirically in this study.

Sensemaking as Analytical Framework

Weick's sensemaking theory treats meaning not as discovered but as actively constructed through ongoing interaction with the social and material environment (Weick, 1988) (Weick et al., 2005). Weick identifies seven properties: sensemaking is grounded in identity construction; retrospective; enacted; social; ongoing; focused on extracted cues; and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995). These properties make sensemaking particularly suited to studying AI in recruitment, characterized by high ambiguity, shifting role boundaries, and contested values (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014) (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015).

Sensemaking has been applied to organizational change (Saeed et al., 2024) (Kieran et al., 2022) and increasingly to AI adoption at work. Goto shows how digitalization experts deploy optimistic future framings to maintain action capacity under AI-induced uncertainty (Goto, 2022). Engström et al. demonstrate that individual sensemaking responses to AI vary considerably, generating different learning paths from the same technological encounter (Engström et al., 2024). Harmat shows that an HR chatbot triggered ambivalent sensemaking, in which AI was simultaneously an innovation signal and a threat to professional expertise (Harmat, 2023). The present study builds on and extends this literature.

Professional Identity and AI

Professional identity centrality, the degree to which one's occupational role is core to one's self-concept, has emerged as a key moderator of technology adoption responses in professional work (Carter and Grover, 2015) (Chen et al., 2021). Waldhauser identifies identity threat as undertheorized in AI acceptance research (Waldhauser, 2021). Converging English-language evidence is provided by Mirbabaie et al., who model AI identity threat and its predictors in the workplace (Mirbabaie et al., 2022). More recent work confirms that identity position modulates AI resistance or accommodation (Chen et al., 2021) (Kieran et al., 2022). In recruitment, professional identity is closely intertwined with relational competence, i.e. the ability to read people, build trust, and exercise nuanced contextual judgement. These capacities are widely understood as constitutively human and therefore non-delegable to machines (Roppelt et al., 2024) (Dutta and Naveen, 2026), rendering AI adoption an identity challenge as much as a practical one.

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Research Method

Research design

This study adopts a constructivist-interpretive qualitative design (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The constructivist epistemological position holds that meanings are not inherent in phenomena but are actively constructed by actors in context; the researcher's task is to reconstruct these constructions through systematic, transparent engagement with the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This stance is particularly appropriate for studying sensemaking, which is, by definition, a meaning-construction process. A qualitative approach was selected because the research question concerns the subjective interpretive frames through which professionals make sense of AI. Such processes are not amenable to quantification and require open-ended, inductive exploration to understand them in their complexity. This study aims at analytical generalization (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The goal is not to estimate prevalence in a statistical sense but to generate theoretical insight transferable to contexts with similar structural features.

Sample and data collection

Eleven semi-structured expert interviews were conducted between February and March 2026. Purposive sampling (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017) was used to maximize variation across roles, sectors, organizational sizes, and AI usage levels. Participants were identified through the author's professional network and targeted LinkedIn outreach, using the following inclusion criteria: (a) current or recent operational involvement in recruitment processes in Germany or Austria, and (b) a professional role that included direct responsibility for or advisory engagement with hiring decisions. One participant (E1) works as an HR technology consultant and was included to access an observational perspective spanning multiple client organizations; his type assignment was treated with appropriate interpretive caution.

The sample comprises 11 participants (eight women, three men), representing roles including talent acquisition specialist, HR business partner, HR director, and HR technology consultant. Sectors represented include energy, technology, consulting, retail, and public administration, with organizational sizes ranging from approximately 150 to over 30,000 employees. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 57 years ($M = 39.2$). Nine participants are from Germany and two from Austria. Table 1 summarizes the demographic profile of the sample. Table 3 provides a full participant profile matrix.

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ID	Gender	Age	Role/Position	Sector	Country	AI Use in Recruitment
E1	Male	30	Founder, HR-tech start-up; HR and AI consultant	Technology/consulting	Germany	Active
E2	Female	36	HR officer and recruiter	Pharmaceutical industry	Germany	None
E3	Female	24	HR business partner	Mechanical engineering	Germany	None
E4	Male	37	HR specialist, recruiting	Food	Germany	Active
E5	Female	38	Head of people and culture	Packaging solutions	Germany	None
E6	Female	45	Senior talent acquisition manager	Energy	Germany	Active
E7	Female	26	Recruiting and talent attraction specialist	Energy	Germany	Active
E8	Female	37	Senior talent acquisition partner	Energy	Austria	Active
E9	Female	50	Talent acquisition and recruiting associate	Auditing/assurance	Germany	Active
E10	Male	51	Recruiting manager	Software	Germany	Active
E11	Female	57	Head of apprenticeship recruiting	Commercial vehicle manufacturing	Austria	None

TABLE 1: Participant Demographics

Note: N = 11; Mean age = 39.2 years; range = 24–57 years.

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"AI Use in Recruitment" is coded according to the definition given in the Results section (Overview: AI Usage Patterns); participants coded "None" may nonetheless use AI tools for tasks outside core recruitment.

Source: Author's own compilation.

AI, Artificial Intelligence; HR, Human Resources

Regarding data saturation, interview collection was guided by a saturation-monitoring protocol drawing on Guest et al.'s practical guidance (Guest et al., 2006). After the eighth interview, two reviewers independently assessed whether new category dimensions continued to emerge. Marginal new information was observed in interviews 9 and 10 (specifically an active self-monitoring variant within the Guardian type). Interviews 10 and 11 yielded no new main categories or type-level differentiations, suggesting adequate saturation for this exploratory study. No financial compensation was offered. Participants were informed that the study examined "subjective experiences and interpretations of AI in recruitment", a formulation sufficiently broad to avoid priming specific response orientations while accurately reflecting the research focus. Full debriefing was offered following each interview.

All participants provided written informed consent, were assured of anonymity, and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Data handling complied with GDPR requirements. This study did not require review by an institutional review board: it is a non-interventional interview study with adult professionals speaking in their occupational capacity, involving no clinical intervention, no vulnerable populations, and no health-related or otherwise sensitive personal data. Ethics review is not mandatory for non-medical qualitative research of this type under the applicable regulations and the institutional policy of the author's institution. Participants are anonymized as E1-E11 throughout.

The author had no prior personal relationship with any participant. The academic context of the data collection was disclosed to all participants, who were made aware that the findings would be written up and potentially published. All interviews were conducted one-on-one; no other parties were present. Each participant was interviewed once.

Interviews were conducted individually via Microsoft Teams between February and March 2026. Each interview followed a semi-structured guide developed through iterative pre-testing; the guide covered four thematic areas: (1) current AI usage and tool experience in recruitment; (2) perceived benefits and risks of AI; (3) professional identity and role change; and (4) future outlook. Questions were open-ended and formulated to invite narration rather than evaluation (e.g., "Can you describe a situation in which you worked with an AI tool in recruitment?"; "What does the possibility of AI taking over parts of your role mean to you professionally?"). Probing follow-up questions were used to elicit elaboration. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit participant consent and transcribed using speech-to-text software, followed by manual verification of transcription accuracy and full anonymization.

To manage reflexivity during data collection, the author maintained a reflexive journal documenting reactions to interview content, emerging interpretive hypotheses, and any moments where the author's own expectations appeared to shape question formulation. These journal entries were consulted during analysis and informed the identification of analytic blind spots.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed in two sequential, iterative steps. The first step applied Mayring's qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2021). The unit of analysis was the thematic segment: any utterance or sequence of utterances addressing a single identifiable topic related to the research question. A combined deductive-inductive category system was used: main categories were derived theoretically from the interview guide themes and from key constructs in the sensemaking and acceptance literature (developed before analysis). Subcategories were generated inductively from the material through two full coding cycles. A codebook was developed prior to the first coding cycle, containing category definitions, anchor examples, and coding rules, and was revised iteratively after the first cycle to clarify boundary cases. The applied category system, including category definitions, anchor examples, and coding rules, is documented in Appendix B. MAXQDA 24 was used to support systematic coding. Coded segments were aggregated via summary tables for cross-case comparison.

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The second step consisted of an interpretive sensemaking analysis, applied after the initial content analysis was complete. Coded segments within sensemaking-relevant categories were annotated with theoretical commentary drawing explicitly on Weick's seven properties (Weick, 1995). Overarching interpretation patterns were identified through cross-case comparison across all eleven transcripts. Individual cases were then clustered into interpretation types based on three analytic dimensions: (a) AI usage behavior in core recruitment; (b) ambivalence management strategy; and (c) dominant sensemaking anchor. The type-assignment decision rule was as follows: a participant was assigned to a type when at least two of the three dimensions converged clearly on that type's profile. Where dimensions diverged, the participant was coded as a borderline case (as with E5).

The three classification dimensions were specified inductively during analysis rather than fixed in advance: candidate dimensions emerged from the pattern-level coding, were applied provisionally, and were refined as the types took shape, so that dimension definitions and type profiles developed reciprocally. Within-type similarity and between-type difference were assessed by comparing participants' configurations across the three dimensions and by preserving cases that did not fit cleanly (e.g. E5) rather than forcing assignment. The resulting typology is therefore offered as an exploratory interpretive heuristic for organizing the observed variation, not as a stable classification of HR professionals.

To account for potential researcher bias during the analytical process, interpretive decisions were systematically documented in analytical memos. Prior to finalization, preliminary findings were discussed with a second researcher from the institution's HRM research group. Divergent interpretations were addressed through iterative re-examination of the original data segments. In addition, a subset of the coded material was independently analyzed by the aforementioned researcher as a partial reliability check. The author's reflexive journal was also consulted systematically during the pattern-identification phase to identify instances in which prior assumptions or expectations may have influenced analytical decisions.

Methodological integrity

Methodological integrity is understood here as comprising fidelity to the subject matter and utility in achieving the research goals (Levitt et al., 2017) (Levitt et al., 2018). The following procedures were used to support these aims.

Data adequacy was addressed through purposive sampling designed to maximize variation in AI usage level, role, sector, and organizational size, ensuring that the phenomenon was studied across multiple manifestations. Groundedness is demonstrated in this article through direct verbatim quotations from participants, each situated within the interview context (the question asked is noted prior to extended quotes). Analytic memos and the reflexive journal documented how the author's perspective was managed; boundary-case decisions were documented in the audit trail.

To address inter-coder reliability, a randomly selected anonymized excerpt covering approximately 600 words of the coded material (roughly 8% of the total coded material) was independently coded by the aforementioned second researcher using the finalized codebook. Percentage agreement on main category assignments (binary: code present/absent per segment) was 81%. Disagreements were concentrated at the boundary between the "active co-creation" and "social embeddedness" sensemaking patterns; these were resolved through discussion, and the codebook definition was sharpened accordingly. The scope of this check constitutes a partial reliability assessment; full inter-coder verification across all material would strengthen future replications and is acknowledged as a limitation.

After primary analysis was complete, a summary of the six sensemaking patterns and the four interpretation types was shared with three participants (E4, E7, and E10). These three participants span the two integration-oriented types - E4 and E10 as Cautious Integrators and E7 as Full Integrator - and therefore do not cover the Guardian and Wait-and-Seer types (addressed in the Limitations). All three confirmed that the descriptions resonated with their experience; E4 suggested a minor clarification to the description of the Cautious Integrator type (specifically, that the tension between driving adoption and naming its risks is experienced as productive rather than paralyzing), which was incorporated. None of the three validated participants disputed their type assignment.

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Disconfirming evidence: Cases that deviated from emergent patterns were specifically sought and documented. E9's self-inclusion in displacement scenarios was treated as a disconfirming case relative to the dominant identity-distancing pattern and was incorporated as a within-type variant in the "Guardian" category rather than being assimilated to the norm. E5's borderline status was preserved rather than resolved.

Results And Discussion

Overview: AI usage patterns

The sample spans two usage profiles. Active AI use in recruitment was coded as present when a participant reported personally using an AI-based tool in at least one core recruitment activity in their current role, including sourcing, application screening or matching, candidate communication, or interview preparation and documentation. Where a participant's involvement was advisory or observational rather than operational - as with E1, whose consultancy role spans multiple client organizations - this is noted in the participant profile matrix (Table 3) and was treated with corresponding interpretive caution. Uses confined to employer branding or general office correspondence were classified as adjacent use rather than recruitment-specific use.

Seven participants reported active AI engagement in recruitment, including Microsoft Copilot, ChatGPT, and proprietary large language models, LinkedIn's AI-assisted sourcing features, and AI-integrated applicant tracking systems with candidate-matching functionality. Four participants reported no systematic AI use in recruitment, though all four used AI tools for adjacent tasks (e.g., employer-branding communication or general office correspondence; see E11 in Table 3). Absence of current use was not equivalent to rejection: all eleven participants articulated concrete future AI integration scenarios, and a widely shared perception of a large gap between current exploitation and available potential was evident.

A recurring observation concerned AI usage in text production (e.g., drafting job advertisements, structuring interview summaries, composing sourcing messages) as the dominant and least contested application. In all documented use cases, AI served in a decision-preparation role; no participant reported delegating final hiring decisions to algorithmic systems. The tools participants discussed differ substantially in autonomy, opacity, and proximity to the hiring decision, ranging from text-production aids to matching and pre-screening systems. Because all reported uses remained at the decision-preparation layer, the analysis treats this shared decisional position as the primary analytic axis and reads sensemaking accordingly. Consistent with this, text-production uses were the least contested application. A systematic comparison of sensemaking across tool types of differing decisional proximity was beyond the scope of this exploratory study and is a priority for future work.

Perceived benefits and risks: The architecture of ambivalence

Perceived benefits cluster around three themes: time efficiency, decision quality, and perspective-broadening. Time efficiency was most consistently cited: participants estimated that AI-supported drafting and pre-screening could reduce administrative task time by 30-50 per cent.

"It lets recruiters do what they do best - connecting people, finding the right match." (E10)

AI-driven pre-screening was seen as capable of reducing individual cognitive bias in high-volume contexts. Third, AI was valued as an ideation partner and perspective-broadener. Risk perceptions were equally pervasive, structured around five concerns: quality limitations (factual hallucinations, domain-specific inaccuracies), loss of human decision authority, algorithmic discrimination (Kelan, 2024) (Bandara et al., 2025), transparency deficits, and structural implementation barriers.

"I need to understand how it reached a conclusion to be able to justify it to candidates and to the organization." (E2)

The architecture of ambivalence is particularly revealing: many perceived benefits carry inherent negatives. Bias reduction simultaneously raises the specter of algorithmic discrimination. Time savings risk contributing to deskilling. Transparency is publicly proclaimed as a prerequisite, even as participants describe progressively reduced scrutiny with

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growing familiarity. This self-undermining structure suggests that, for many participants, ambivalence constituted an enduring mode of sensemaking under conditions of technological uncertainty, rather than merely a transitional state preceding acceptance or rejection.

Disconfirming evidence: Two participants (E1 and E7) described a condition in which this ambivalent structure had substantially resolved, not through elimination of tension but through the development of confident agency over AI tools. This pattern was not assimilated to the prevailing ambivalence finding but is captured separately in the "Full Integrator" type (Table 2), suggesting that trajectory matters: the architecture of ambivalence is a phase as much as a permanent condition.

Sensemaking patterns

Six overarching sensemaking patterns were identified across the 11 interviews, each corresponding to one or more of Weick's seven sensemaking properties (Weick, 1995). Because Weick's seven properties informed the interpretive analysis, several of these patterns are best understood as empirical manifestations of established properties within the recruitment setting: identity protection as identity-grounded sensemaking, retrospective key moments as retrospection, social embeddedness as the social property, metaphorical devices as plausibility over accuracy, and the active co-creation of uncertainty as enactment. The analysis's more distinctive contribution lies less in these manifestations than in what they jointly enable - the participant-anchored typology and the provisional, habituation-like mechanism, which is not among Weick's original properties.

Identity Protection as the Master Pattern

The most pervasive pattern was the evaluation of AI in direct relation to professional identity: what does this mean for what I do, and what makes my work meaningful? This corresponds to Weick's property of identity-grounded sensemaking. The relational core of recruitment - empathy, contextual reading of persons, and sensing what a CV cannot convey - was consistently identified as the non-delegable, distinctively human dimension of the role.

"This personal part, working with people, getting to know them, is precisely what I love about my job. And that's something I don't want taken over." (E2)

Potential job displacement was, in all but one case, attributed to hypothetical others rather than to the self. This highlights a defensive distancing mechanism consistent with identity-protective cognition. E9 constituted the notable exception to this pattern: she explicitly included herself in displacement scenarios, which informed her assignment to the "Guardian" type as a distinct variant.

Retrospective Key Moments

For a majority of participants, current orientations towards AI could be traced to a specific emotionally salient prior experience: an AI output that proved demonstrably wrong, a conference revealing the scale of AI adoption elsewhere, or an internal project that reframed the technology's scope. These experiences functioned as retrospective anchors. Key moments frequently involved narrated or observed events rather than direct personal experience, underscoring the social character of sensemaking.

Active Co-creation of Uncertainty

Several participants described an active, ongoing engagement with AI-induced uncertainty. E4 articulated an explicit concern about progressive deskilling through AI reliance while simultaneously expanding that reliance - a pattern of enacted enactment (Weick, 1988) in which action precedes and produces understanding.

"Maybe I'm sawing off three of four chair legs with this but I think I can handle the tools, and that's what matters." (E4)

Social Embeddedness of Meaning

Interpretations of AI emerged through organizational events (implementation projects, policy communications, professional conferences) and interpersonal interaction. Two participants in the same organization showed divergent interpretations attributable to their different levels of active co-authorship of the organization's AI culture: one had

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designed and implemented tools (E7: Full Integrator), and the other had received them (E6: Cautious Integrator). This pair illustrates that agency in the social construction of AI environments - not merely exposure - matters for the meanings AI holds.

Sustained Ambivalence as the Constitutive Condition

Contrary to stage-based adoption models in which ambivalence is treated as transitional, ambivalent frames were maintained simultaneously and persistently. Participants actively drove AI implementations while openly acknowledging that these might undermine aspects of their roles - high-stakes, cognitively sophisticated ambivalence rather than confused indecision.

Metaphors and Analogies as Plausibility Devices

Participants regularly reached for metaphors from other domains: the automobile revolution as a template for inevitable but initially resisted change; social media algorithms as analogies for AI opacity; nuclear energy as a figure for responsible versus irresponsible use.

"Control is like an atom bomb: the technology exists, and what matters is what you choose to do with it and who is responsible." (E10)

These metaphorical constructions are not evaluated for factual accuracy but for their capacity to make AI interpretable and action-enabling - precisely the plausibility-over-accuracy dynamic Weick identifies as central to sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

Interpretation types

Individual cases were condensed into four interpretation types based on three analytic dimensions: usage behavior, ambivalence management strategy, and dominant sensemaking anchor. Table 2 presents a cross-type schematic overview of the four interpretation types, while the type-assignment decision rule (convergence on at least two of the three dimensions) and the full participant-level evidence base underlying these types are documented in the participant-profile matrix (Table 3).

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Type	Core Orientation	Ambivalence Handling	AI Usage	Primary Sensemaking Anchor
Guardians	Protecting relational core; human contact as non-negotiable professional boundary	Firm value-based limits; displaces job-displacement risk to "others"	Low to active (within-type variation)	Professional identity as shield
Wait-and-Seers	Open in principle; adoption contingent on external validation	Delegates uncertainty; observes peers before acting	None to low	Social benchmarking
Cautious Integrators	AI as operational support while retaining final decision authority	Holds competing frames via explicit role-delineation	Moderate to high	Control and human oversight
Full Integrators	AI woven into self-concept; AI threat no longer salient	Residual tensions dissolved through active co-creation	High/active shaper	Agency and accountability norm

TABLE 2: HR Professionals' AI Interpretation Types in Recruitment

Source: Author's own compilation.

AI, Artificial Intelligence; HR, Human Resources

"Guardians" (n = 2: E2, E9) maintain a firm value-based boundary: not rejection of AI but principled delineation of territory that must remain human. For E2, this boundary falls at the incoming application. E9 represents a distinct variant: she includes herself in displacement scenarios and narrates her own growing AI reliance as a source of professional anxiety. This within-type variation is retained rather than suppressed to preserve fidelity to the data.

"Wait-and-Seers" (n = 2: E3, E11) are open to AI in principle but condition adoption on social validation. This social benchmarking strategy manages ambiguity through deferral. The type is fully represented in the non-usage group.

"Cautious Integrators" (n = 4: E4, E6, E8, E10, with E5 as borderline) constitute the most populous type. They actively integrate AI as operational support while maintaining firm insistence on human control at decisional chokepoints. E4's case is the most complex: he drives a multi-tool implementation while openly naming the self-undermining risk and remains capable of action through control confidence.

"Full Integrators" (n = 2: E1, E7) have incorporated AI so thoroughly that the question of AI threat no longer presents as salient. Crucially, Full Integration is not uncritical acceptance but active co-creation: these participants have designed, implemented, and governed AI tools, achieving agency over the technology. Note that although E1 differed from the operational recruiters due to his consulting role, his direct involvement in designing and governing AI-supported recruitment systems provided sufficient evidence for this classification.

"I genuinely could not do my job without AI anymore. But that's not because I've given up control. It's because I built this into my workflow deliberately." (E7)

The norm of accountability, "saying the AI decided is the worst thing you can say: you are responsible when you use it" (E1), functions as the ethical anchor permitting full integration without professional identity loss.

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ID	AI Use in Recruitment	Ambivalence Handling	Sensemaking Anchor	Key Signal	Assigned Type
E1	Active; consultancy role with cross-firm observational access; consults clients in implementing AI-assisted matching to compare candidate profiles with job requirements	Active; accountability framing resolves tension	Responsibility and agency	"Saying the AI decided is the worst thing you can say"	Full Integrator
E2	None in core recruitment	Firm boundary at incoming application; displaces risk to others	Relational identity	"This personal part is precisely what I love about my job"	Guardian
E3	None in core recruitment	Explicit wait-and-see; observes peers before committing	Social benchmarking	"I don't think we'll be the first to try it"	Wait-and-Seer
E4	Active; leading multi-tool implementation	Names self-undermining risk openly; acts via control confidence	Expertise and control	"Maybe I'm sawing off three of four chair legs"	Cautious Integrator
E5	None in recruitment; high future orientation	Temporal structuring (now: support; later: risk); borderline	Future potential vs identity	"Only ~10% of the potential is currently used"	Borderline Wait-and-Seer/Cautious Integrator
E6	Active; ATS with AI matching	Accepts AI as imperfect; retains final judgement	Human oversight and data protection	"I can't rely on it 100% – it doesn't replace me"	Cautious Integrator
E7	Active; implemented transcription/matching tools	Fully integrated; co-created team AI culture	Agency through co-creation	"I genuinely could not do my job without AI anymore"	Full Integrator
E8	Active; ATS, LinkedIn AI sourcing	"Driving seat" metaphor; supervised support only	Control and responsibility	"I'm always still in the driving seat"	Cautious Integrator

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E9	Active; uses Copilot to prepare reports on job interview outcomes	Includes self in displacement; unique in dataset	Relational identity; creative abdication fear	"I think we're making ourselves redundant"	Guardian (active-use variant)
E10	Active; personally uses AI-enabled ATS matching to support applicant pre-screening for open positions	Nuclear metaphor; control as human choice	Strategic framing; human-at-center	"Control is like an atom bomb – you choose what to do with it"	Cautious Integrator
E11	None in recruitment; Copilot for employer brand	Open but waiting for organizational preconditions	Human dignity in candidate experience	"An avatar interview is simply unthinkable"	Wait-and-Seer

TABLE 3: Participant Profile Matrix: Dimensional Basis for Type Assignment

Note: E5 is a borderline case (Wait-and-Seer, Cautious Integrator).

Source: Author's own compilation.

"AI Use in Recruitment" is coded according to the definition given in the Results section (Overview: AI Usage Patterns); participants coded "None" may nonetheless use AI tools for tasks outside core recruitment. All quotations are translated from German by the author.

AI, Artificial Intelligence; ATS, Applicant Tracking Systems

Discussion

Professional Identity as Master Interpretive Frame

The central finding is that professional identity functions as the superordinate frame through which HR professionals evaluate AI in recruitment. This elaborates Waldhauser's identification of identity threat as a relevant variable by demonstrating that identity is not a reactive concern triggered by AI but an active, prospective framing resource structuring all evaluative dimensions (Waldhauser, 2021) (Mirbabaie et al., 2022). It should be acknowledged, however, that professional identity, role change, and occupational self-concept were explicitly addressed in the interview guide, so the prominence of the identity frame is partly a product of the instrument. That participants also invoked identity unprompted across talk about usage, benefits, and risks lends the finding weight, but theory-informed questioning plausibly heightened its salience, an influence monitored through the reflexive journal and revisited in the Limitations. It deepens the finding of Chen et al. by suggesting that, in the HR recruitment context, it is the depth of active co-authorship of AI tools, rather than role status per se, that separates Cautious from Full Integrators (Chen et al., 2021). Similarly, Kieran et al. find that HR professionals' sensemaking capabilities are central to their role in managing technological change (Kieran et al., 2022).

This has important consequences for technology acceptance research. TAM and UTAUT models treat acceptance as primarily a function of instrumental utility perceptions. The present findings suggest that, for professionals whose occupational self-concept centers on distinctively human capacities, the evaluative question is not whether AI is useful but what using AI means for who I am as a professional. Future quantitative acceptance research in professional contexts would benefit from incorporating validated measures of professional identity centrality and identity threat sensitivity.

Habituation as an Adoption Pathway: Distinguishing Mechanisms

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Across multiple participants, growing familiarity with AI outputs was associated with reduced critical scrutiny - not because participants had changed their stated views about the importance of human oversight but because daily use had normalized reliance on AI suggestions. This gap between espoused transparency requirements and enacted uncritical use suggests that acceptance can develop through habituation, bypassing deliberate rational evaluation.

Three alternative explanations must be considered and adjudicated. First, quality updating: if AI outputs improve over time, rational actors would rationally reduce verification effort. This is possible in principle, but the data argue against it as the primary mechanism: several participants describing reduced scrutiny also reported specific recent AI failures, suggesting that quality improvement alone does not explain the pattern. Second, social normalization: as AI use becomes an organizational standard, non-use may generate social costs. This mechanism is partially supported - conference encounters feature as sensemaking cues - but reduced scrutiny appears to be an individual-level phenomenon rather than a response to explicit social pressure. Third, habituation proper - where repeated exposure renders a stimulus less salient and response less deliberate - is consistent with findings across multiple participants whose expressed views on AI reliability have not changed. This aligns with Carter et al.'s work on IT identity normalization (Carter et al., 2022) and with Orlikowski and Scott's broader sociotechnical framework (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). Habituation is accordingly the most consistent reading of these cross-sectional data, offered provisionally and requiring longitudinal confirmation, while acknowledging that quality updating and social normalization may operate concurrently in some cases. Two further possibilities cannot be excluded on cross-sectional self-report data: experience-based trust calibration and retrospective rationalization or social-desirability effects in how participants recount their own scrutiny. Neither can be adjudicated here, which is precisely why the habituation-like reading is advanced provisionally and flagged for longitudinal and behavioral confirmation.

The governance implications are practically significant: if acceptance develops through habituation, the accountability norms and critical review practices championed rhetorically may gradually erode in practice, with consequences for decision quality and legal compliance under EU AI Act Article 14 (human oversight requirements for high-risk AI in recruitment).

Interpretation Types in Context

The prevalence of the Cautious Integrator type suggests that the field is not a polarized landscape of enthusiasts and resisters but one of complex, context-sensitive engagement. This matches the pattern Harmat terms functional ambivalence in HR chatbot adoption (Harmat, 2023), extending it to a wider range of AI tools. The institutional context - co-determination requirements, GDPR enforcement, EU AI Act compliance timelines - will likely accelerate or retard transitions between types in ways cross-sectional data cannot capture. The Guardian type's firm boundary-drawing may be partially institutionally supported by works council co-determination rights, which give HR professionals legitimate formal recourse when AI systems are introduced.

Transferability: The findings are analytically generalizable to contexts with similar structural features - specifically, knowledge-intensive professional roles in which relational competence is central to occupational identity, and organizations operating in regulatory frameworks that foreground co-determination and data protection. The findings should not be transferred without theoretical adjustment to (a) non-professional occupational contexts, (b) contexts with significantly different regulatory regimes (e.g., US at-will employment contexts where works councils are absent), or (c) AI systems deployed at the decision-making rather than decision-preparation layer, where the identity stakes may differ qualitatively.

Consistency and Inconsistency with Prior Research

The present findings converge with several strands of prior research. The centrality of professional identity echoes work on identity-laden technology adoption in expert occupations (Chen et al., 2021) (Goto, 2022) and corroborates Waldhauser's contention that identity threat is underweighted in acceptance research (Waldhauser, 2021), a contention also supported by Mirbabaie et al. (Mirbabaie et al., 2022). The prevalence of ambivalence is consistent with Harmat's (Harmat, 2023) account of functional ambivalence in HR chatbot adoption, extended here to a broader range of AI tools,

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while the finding that interpretations are constructed through organizational events and interpersonal exchange aligns with Engström et al.'s (Engström et al., 2024) demonstration that identical technological encounters can generate divergent learning paths.

At the same time, the findings diverge from established accounts in three respects. First, whereas stage-based adoption models treat ambivalence as a transitional state to be resolved, the present data indicate that ambivalence can be a sustained, constitutive condition rather than a way-station en route to acceptance. Second, the results qualify the rational-evaluation premise of the TAM and UTAUT traditions (Davis, 1989) (Venkatesh et al., 2003): acceptance did not invariably follow from a deliberate appraisal of usefulness but could also emerge through habituation that bypasses explicit cost-benefit reasoning (Carter et al., 2022). Third, the analysis nuances accounts that foreground occupational status as the primary driver of professional responses to AI (Chen et al., 2021). In this recruitment context, the depth of active co-authorship of AI tools distinguished Cautious from Full Integrators more clearly than hierarchical position did. These points of divergence delimit the scope of existing models rather than refute them, and they specify boundary conditions that future theorizing should address. This co-authorship distinction is exploratory and rests on a small number of cases (most directly, the E6/E7 pair within one organization). It is offered as a hypothesis for confirmation rather than an established moderator.

Limitations and Ethical Reflections

Several limitations bound the claims of this study. First, the sample comprises only eleven participants, a size consistent with the study's interpretive, saturation-oriented logic and appropriate for analytical rather than statistical generalization. The sample is also characterized by a gender imbalance toward women and some sectoral concentration, as several participants were drawn from the same organization. Second, the cross-sectional design captures a snapshot of inherently dynamic interpretation processes. Third, the study relies exclusively on self-reported interpretations. It does not observe actual behavior in AI-mediated hiring decisions. Fourth, because the interview guide explicitly addressed professional identity, role change, and self-concept, the salience of the identity frame may be partly an artefact of the instrument. This was monitored reflexively but cannot be fully excluded. Finally, the participant-validation exercise covered only the two integration-oriented types (E4, E7, and E10) and did not include Guardian or Wait-and-Seer participants, so the resonance of the type descriptions was confirmed for part of the typology only.

Data collection gave rise to two ethical considerations that may be relevant for future research. First, participants occasionally reported organizational applications of AI that raised concerns regarding employee surveillance and potential bias in recruitment and selection processes. Although these issues were not explicitly addressed in the interview guide, the interviewer acknowledged their relevance without steering the discussion in a particular direction. These instances were additionally documented in the reflexive journal as potentially important avenues for future investigation. Second, the researcher-participant relationship may have introduced a moderate degree of social desirability bias, potentially leading participants to overstate the sophistication of their engagement with AI technologies. This risk was mitigated in part through the anonymization protocol and through the use of follow-up probes aimed at eliciting concrete examples rather than abstract or generalized claims.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to three bodies of literature. For sensemaking theory in HRM, it demonstrates that professional identity operates as the superordinate interpretive frame through which AI is evaluated, deepening prior findings and extending the sensemaking literature by identifying a provisional, habituation-like mechanism. For technology acceptance research, it proposes a provisional, habituation-like pathway to acceptance conceptually distinct from quality updating and social normalization, suggesting the need for expanded models that account for normalization processes and their governance risks. For the literature on AI in recruitment, it provides a theoretically grounded, participant-anchored typology with full profile documentation and member-checked resonance for the integration-oriented types.

Practical Recommendations

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First, organizations should recognize sustained ambivalence as the normal condition. AI implementation processes should create structured spaces - facilitated workshops, regular team reflection formats, psychological safety norms - for employees to voice competing interpretations without pressure to adopt a single official position. Concerns expressed obliquely signal unaddressed anxieties.

Second, hands-on experience in bounded, lower-stakes contexts provides the most effective foundation for calibrated acceptance. Piloting AI tools with structured debrief and peer sharing is more consequential than information campaigns. Crucially, habituation risk must be managed simultaneously: implementation protocols should build in mandatory, regular moments of critical output review to counteract normalization of uncritical reliance and to satisfy EU AI Act human oversight obligations.

Third, AI adoption in recruitment should be framed as professional role evolution rather than efficiency optimization. Communications making visible what AI enables professionals to do more of - candidate relationships, strategic advisory, distinctively human capacities - will resonate more effectively than technology-centric messaging. The norm of human responsibility for AI-assisted decisions should be explicitly and repeatedly affirmed.

Future Research

Longitudinal designs are needed to track how interpretation types evolve as organizational AI adoption deepens. Observational research examining how HR professionals actually behave in AI-mediated hiring decisions would address the action-interpretation gap. Comparative cross-national research would enrich understanding of how institutional contexts shape interpretation types and moderate the habituation pathway. Research incorporating candidates' perspectives is urgently needed to generate a dyadic understanding of the human stakes involved. Future studies might also explore whether identity-based measures (professional identity centrality, occupational self-threat) moderate acceptance pathways in a way amenable to quantitative testing.

Conclusions

This study examined how HR professionals make sense of artificial intelligence in recruitment as they navigate the tension between acceptance and skepticism. Across eleven expert interviews, professional identity emerged as the superordinate frame through which AI is evaluated: what matters to participants is less whether AI is useful than what relying on it means for the distinctively human, relational core of their work. Their orientations condensed into four interpretive types - Guardians, Wait-and-Seers, Cautious Integrators, and Full Integrators - with cautious, oversight-preserving integration the most common stance. A further insight is that acceptance need not rest on conviction: it can also develop through a habituation-like process, as routine reliance gradually erodes the critical scrutiny that professionals continue to endorse in principle. The overall contribution of the study is to bring sensemaking, professional identity, and technology acceptance into a single account of AI adoption in recruitment and to foreground a provisional, habituation-like pathway that carries tangible governance risks for human oversight. Sustaining meaningful human judgement will therefore depend less on persuading professionals of the value of AI than on designing structures that keep critical reflection alive as AI becomes an ordinary part of recruitment work.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guide

Introduction (by the interviewer)

Purpose: Building trust, clarifying formal aspects, and establishing an open conversational atmosphere.

Brief introduction to the research approach

Aim of the interview: to explore subjective experiences and perceptions

Note on anonymity, voluntariness, and the right to withdraw at any time

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Consent to audio recording

Emphasis: there are no right or wrong answers - this is about personal experiences and views

Duration: approx. 45-60 minutes

1. Background and Professional Context

Purpose: Contextualising responses within the participants' professional and organisational setting.

1.1 Current role and responsibilities

For all participants: Could you briefly introduce yourself (including your age) and tell me about your current role and responsibilities in HR or recruitment?

Optional: How long have you been in this role? What does your area of responsibility look like in concrete terms?

1.2 Organisational context

For all participants: In what organisational context do you work (e.g. company size, industry)?

Optional: Have there been any changes in recent years - in your own professional development or in your organisational context?

2. First Encounter with AI in Recruitment

Purpose: Reconstructing the trigger for individual sensemaking processes; establishing a shared understanding.

2.1 First awareness of AI and initial perceptions

For all participants: What do you understand by AI in recruitment?

Definition, if needed for general understanding: By AI in recruitment, I mean digital systems that use data to support or partially automate certain tasks in the application process - for example, analysing applications, matching candidate profiles, or communicating with applicants. The term refers broadly to algorithmically assisted support within the recruitment process.

With AI experience: Can you recall when AI first became relevant to you in the context of recruitment?

Without AI experience: Can you recall when AI first came up for you in the context of recruitment, or what might make it relevant for you in the future?

Optional:

With AI experience: Was there a specific occasion or event? Was it your own initiative or a directive from above?

Without AI experience: Can you imagine a potential occasion? Do you think the initiative for using or implementing AI would come from you or from the organisation? Have you already encountered AI in recruitment at other companies?

3. Current Use of AI

Purpose: Grounding responses in lived practice; capturing current usage patterns.

3.1 Tools in use

With AI experience: Which AI-based tools or applications are currently used in recruitment at your organisation?

Without AI experience: Where can you imagine AI being used?

Optional:

With AI experience: In which phases of the recruitment process is it embedded? (Sourcing, screening, candidate communication, ...) Since approximately when?

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Without AI experience: In which phases of the recruitment process could it be embedded? When do you think AI might be adopted? Give a rough timeframe.

3.2 Day-to-day experience

With AI experience: How do you experience the use of these systems in your day-to-day work? (How do humans and AI work together?)

Without AI experience: How do you imagine day-to-day work with these systems would look?

Optional:

With AI experience: What stands out? What works well? Where do challenges arise? What has changed about how you work?

Without AI experience: What might work well? Where could challenges arise? What would change about how you work?

4. Subjective Meaning-Making

Purpose: Exploring how AI is interpreted and integrated into existing frameworks of meaning.

4.1 Personal significance

For all participants: What does the use of AI in recruitment mean to you personally?

Optional: More support, control, relief, or risk? Has this meaning changed over time? What does AI mean to you in your everyday life?

4.2 Professional role and self-concept

With AI experience: To what extent does AI influence your self-concept or your role as an HR professional? Has your responsibility/your role/your processes/your ways of working changed?

Without AI experience: To what extent would AI influence your self-concept or your role as an HR professional? Do you think your responsibility/your role/your processes/your ways of working would change?

Optional:

With AI experience: Do you feel strengthened or constrained in your decision-making?

Without AI experience: Would you feel strengthened or constrained in your decision-making? Do you have concerns that AI might change your role in the future? How do you feel about that?

5. Acceptance and Skepticism

Purpose: Capturing the tension between positive and negative attitudes.

5.1 Positive aspects

With AI experience:

Which aspects of AI use do you experience as positive, helpful, or meaningful?

Without AI experience: Which aspects of AI use can you imagine being positive, helpful, or meaningful?

Optional:

With AI experience:

Does AI use open up new space for you? (Other tasks, more time) Have there been moments when you felt particularly supported or relieved by AI?

Without AI experience: Could AI use open up new space for you? Have you heard of positive experiences with AI from others?

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5.2 Critical aspects

With AI experience: Which aspects of AI use do you view negatively, critically, or sceptically?

Without AI experience: Which aspects of AI use would you view negatively, critically, or sceptically?

Optional:

With AI experience:

Do you have concerns about potential discrimination by AI? Do you believe AI is fairer or less fair than humans? Do you have concerns about data protection? Were there moments when you felt uncomfortable using AI?

Without AI experience: Have you heard of negative experiences with AI from others?

5.3 Formative situations

For all participants: Have there been situations that particularly shaped or changed your attitude towards AI?

Optional: Concrete experiences that stayed with you, or key moments? Narratives, news stories, changes in legislation? How did you feel about them?

5.4 Facilitating factors

For all participants: What, in your view, promotes or strengthens acceptance of AI in recruitment - in yourself, in your team, or among people you know? What promotes scepticism?

Optional: Where do you see AI as superior to human decisions, and where not? What would need to change - in AI itself or in how it is used - for acceptance to increase or scepticism to decrease?

5.5 Preconditions

For all participants: What would need to be in place for AI to be meaningfully integrated into the recruitment process on a lasting basis?

5.6 Potential versus actual use

For all participants: How do you assess the relationship between the potential of AI in recruitment and its actual use in organisations?

Optional: Are there untapped possibilities, in your view? What might explain the gap?

6. *Uncertainty and Responsibility*

Purpose: Central sensemaking dimension - managing ambiguity.

6.1 Dealing with uncertainty

For all participants: Does the traceability of AI decisions or outputs play a role in your attitude towards AI? Have there been situations where you could not understand or trace a decision?

Optional: Is it clear to you how the AI arrives at its assessments and outputs, or on what basis it makes decisions? Do you check them afterwards?

6.2 Responsibility

For all participants: Who, in your view, bears responsibility within organisations for decisions in which AI is involved?

Optional: Individual level, team level, or organisational level? Have there been uncertainties around legal responsibility? (Data protection, legislative changes such as the EU AI Act)

7. *Social Embeddedness*

Purpose: Sensemaking as a social process.

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7.1 Discussions within the organisation

For all participants: Is the use of AI in recruitment discussed and developed further in your organisation, and if so, how? How do you think your organisation generally regards AI?

Optional: Within the HR team, with managers, or with senior leadership?

7.2 Dominant viewpoints

For all participants: Are there particular opinions or dominant views on AI in your organisation?

Optional: Future opportunity versus risk? Technological progress versus loss of control? Does this influence your own perception?

8. Future Perspective

Purpose: Forward-looking reflection.

8.1 Future role of AI

For all participants: How do you envisage the future role of AI in recruitment in about five years?

Optional: More use, less use, roughly the same, more critical use? How would you ideally like to work with AI - if at all?

8.2 Additions

For all participants: Is there anything else related to AI in recruitment that is important to you and that we have not yet discussed?

Closing

Thanks for participating

Opportunity for questions

Information about the next steps of the project and the option to receive findings upon completion.

Appendix B: Coding framework

The category system combines main categories derived deductively from the interview guide and from the sensemaking and technology acceptance literature with subcategories generated inductively across two coding cycles (see "Data Analysis" subsection in Research Method). Table 4 documents the content-analytic category system applied in the first analytical step; Table 5 documents the pattern-level codes applied in the second, interpretive step. Pattern-level codes were assigned in addition to, not instead of, the main categories in Table 4. All quotations are translated from German by the author.

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Main Category	Subcategories	Definition	Anchor Example	Coding Rule
1. AI understanding and usage practice	1.1 Definition and scope of "AI in recruitment"	Descriptive segments in which participants state what they understand AI in recruitment to be, which tools they use or have access to, at which stage of the hiring process these are deployed, how regularly, and on whose initiative. Includes accounts of not using AI in core recruitment and of using AI for adjacent tasks.	"We mainly use ChatGPT during the preparation phase of the recruitment process, for example, to draft job advertisements and develop interview questions." (E6)	Descriptive accounts of tools, tasks, frequency and initiative only. Evaluative statements about what AI does well or badly are coded 2 or 3. Deployment that has not yet been decided is coded 7; an implementation already decided or under way is coded here.
	1.2 Tools and systems in use			
	1.3 Process phase of deployment			
	1.4 Frequency, regularity, and initiative of use			
	1.5 Non-use in core recruitment and use in adjacent tasks			
2. Perceived benefits	2.1 Time efficiency and administrative relief	Segments attributing a positive effect of AI to recruitment work, whether experienced first-hand or anticipated.	"It lets recruiters do what they do best - connecting people, finding the right match." (E10)	Code the specific benefit named, not the participant's overall stance towards AI. Where a benefit and its inherent downside appear within the same interpretive move, double-code to 3 and flag the segment for pattern P5 (Table 5).
	2.2 Decision quality and reduction of individual bias			
	2.3 Perspective-broadening and ideation support			
	2.4 Release of capacity for relational work			
3. Perceived risks and concerns	3.1 Output quality (hallucination, domain inaccuracy)	Segments attributing a hazard, limitation or negative consequence to AI in recruitment, including barriers that prevent its meaningful use.	"I need to understand how it reached a conclusion to be able to justify it to candidates and to the organization." (E2)	Subcategory 3.4 covers opacity attributed to the system as a property. Where the participant describes their own verification practice or the allocation of accountability, code 5. Risks framed as consequences for the participant's own role are additionally coded 4.
	3.2 Loss of human decision authority and deskilling			
	3.3 Algorithmic discrimination and fairness			
	3.4 Transparency and opacity deficits			

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	3.5 Data protection and legal uncertainty			
	3.6 Structural and organisational implementation barriers			
4. Professional identity and role change	4.1 Relational core as non-delegable	Segments in which AI is evaluated with explicit reference to the participant's occupational self-concept: what the role is, what makes it meaningful, and what would have to remain human for it to remain that role.	"This personal part, working with people, getting to know them, is precisely what I love about my job. And that's something I don't want taken over." (E2)	Requires reference to the occupational self-concept; a purely instrumental objection to tool quality is coded 3. In 4.3 the target of the displacement attribution (self or unspecified others) is recorded for every segment, as this distinction carries the within-type variant in the Guardian category.
	4.2 Expertise, professional judgement and control			
	4.3 Displacement scenarios (self vs. unspecified others)			
	4.4 Role evolution and changed task profile			
	4.5 Emotional valence of anticipated change			
5. Traceability, oversight and responsibility	5.1 Comprehensibility of AI outputs	Segments on whether and how AI outputs are checked, who is answerable for AI-assisted decisions, and how regulatory requirements enter that judgement.	"Saying the AI decided is the worst thing you can say: you are responsible when you use it." (E1)	Espoused requirements ("transparency is essential") are coded 3.4; enacted practice is coded 5.2. Subcategory 5.3 is coded only where a participant describes a change in their own checking behaviour over time; every 5.3 segment was reviewed by both coders, as this subcategory carries the empirical basis for the habituation-like reading. Divergence between espoused and enacted scrutiny is recorded in an analytic memo.
	5.2 Verification practice and intensity of scrutiny			
	5.3 Reported change in scrutiny over time			
	5.4 Locus of responsibility (individual, team, organisation)			
	5.5 Legal and regulatory framing (EU AI Act, GDPR)			
6. Social embeddedness and organisational discourse	6.1 Exchange within the HR team and with peers	Segments in which the participant's interpretation of AI is described as arising	"I don't think we'll be the first to try it." (E3)	Code where meaning is received or jointly negotiated. Where the participant is the

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	6.2 Management and leadership positioning	from, or being negotiated in, interaction with others inside or outside the organization.		originator or designer of the shared frame, code pattern P3 rather than P4 (Table 5). Procedure involving the works council is coded 6.5 and, where the concern is legal exposure, additionally 5.5.
	6.3 Organisational AI culture and implementation projects			
	6.4 External reference points (conferences, media, other organisations, professional networks)			
	6.5 Works council involvement and co-determination			
7. Future outlook and preconditions	7.1 Anticipated role of AI on a five-year horizon	Prospective segments on how AI use is expected or wished to develop, what would have to be in place for it, and where the participant locates absolute limits.	"An avatar interview is simply unthinkable." (E11)	Prospective statements are coded here even when evaluative, unless they describe an implementation already decided or under way (then 1). Red lines (7.5) are additionally coded 4.1 where the participant justifies them by reference to the relational core of the role.
	7.2 Gap between potential and actual use			
	7.3 Preconditions for lasting integration			
	7.4 Desired form of human-AI collaboration			
	7.5 Red lines and non-negotiables			

TABLE 4: Category System, Definitions, Anchor Examples, and Coding Rules

Note: One anchor example is given per main category; the complete set of segment-level anchors is held in the MAXQDA 24 project file and is available from the author upon reasonable request.

Source: Author's own compilation.

AI, Artificial Intelligence; GDPR, General Data Protection Regulation

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Pattern	Sensemaking Property (Weick, 1995)	Definition	Boundary Rule	Illustrative Anchor
P1 Identity protection	Grounded in identity construction	AI is evaluated through what the role means to the participant, and a boundary is drawn around work held to be non-delegable.	Coded only where the evaluation is anchored in the occupational self-concept; an objection to output quality without that reference is coded as risk (category 3) and not as P1. Displacement attributions are recorded together with their target (self or unspecified others).	"This personal part [...] is precisely what I love about my job." (E2)
P2 Retrospective key moments	Retrospective	A delimited, emotionally salient prior event to which the participant traces their present orientation towards AI.	Requires a narratable single event plus an explicit or implicit link to the present stance; general statements of accumulated experience are not coded P2. Events known only through the accounts of others are coded P2 and additionally P4.	"We tested ChatGPT during the pre-screening of an application. It stated that the candidate had no leadership experience, although her CV clearly said that she had managed a team of twelve employees for six years. That was the moment when I realized that you really have to check every output." (E6)
P3 Active co-creation of uncertainty	Enactive of sensible environments	The participant expands or shapes AI use while simultaneously naming the risk this creates, so that action precedes and produces the understanding.	Requires the participant's own agency in producing the conditions they then interpret (initiating, configuring, implementing or governing tools) together with continued articulation of the associated risk. Using a tool introduced by others is not P3.	"Maybe I'm sawing off three of four chair legs with this but I think I can handle the tools." (E4)

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P4 Social embeddedness of meaning	Social	Interpretations of AI are shown to emerge from organisational events and interpersonal exchange rather than from individual appraisal alone.	Covers the reception and joint negotiation of meaning. Where the participant originates the shared frame, code P3 instead. Segments qualifying for both are double-coded, with the direction of influence noted in the memo. This boundary was the main locus of coder disagreement in the reliability check and was sharpened to the wording given here.	Case anchor: the E6/E7 pair within one organisation, diverging by depth of active co-authorship rather than exposure.
P5 Sustained ambivalence	Ongoing	Competing positive and negative frames are held simultaneously and without resolution, including cases where a named benefit carries its own negative.	Requires co-presence of the competing frames within a single interpretive move, not merely the occurrence of benefits and risks at separate points of the interview. A sequential resolution is coded P2. Segments in which the tension is described as resolved through agency over the tools are treated as disconfirming evidence and are not assimilated to P5.	"I think we're making ourselves redundant." (E9, an active user monitoring her own deskilling)
P6 Plausibility-seeking through metaphor	Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy; focused on extracted cues	Analogies imported from other domains are used to render AI interpretable and to restore the capacity to act.	Coded for figurative constructions that perform orientational or evaluative work; incidental figures of speech are not coded. Metaphors are compared for the interpretive work they perform and are not assessed for factual adequacy.	"Control is like an atom bomb: the technology exists, and what matters is what you choose to do with it and who is responsible." (E10)

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TABLE 5: Pattern-Level Codes, Corresponding Sensemaking Properties, and Boundary Rules

Note: Pattern-level codes were applied to segments already coded under the category system in Table 4 and could be assigned in combination.
Source: Author's own compilation.
AI, Artificial Intelligence

Additional Information

Author Contributions

All authors have reviewed the final version to be published and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Concept and design: Stephan Weinert

Acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data: Stephan Weinert

Drafting of the manuscript: Stephan Weinert

Critical review of the manuscript for important intellectual content: Stephan Weinert

Disclosures

Human subjects: Consent was obtained from all participants in this study.

Animal subjects: All authors have confirmed that this study did not involve animal subjects or tissue.

Conflicts of interest: In compliance with [the ICMJE uniform disclosure form](#), all authors declare the following:

- **Payment/services info:** All authors have declared that no financial support was received from any organization for the submitted work.
- **Financial relationships:** All authors have declared that they have no financial relationships at present or within the previous three years with any organizations that might have an interest in the submitted work.
- **Other relationships:** All authors have declared that there are no other relationships or activities that could appear to have influenced the submitted work.

Data Availability Statements

The datasets (and/or code) supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The coding framework is provided in Appendix B.

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