COMMUNICATING WITH A CHATBOT: BETWEEN EFFICIENCY AND FRUSTRATION

Liliana CISMARIU
Politehnica University Timisoara, Romania

Abstract: The rapid emergence of digital technologies is felt across all aspects of everyday life and is fundamentally reconfiguring the paradigms of contemporary communication. Communication with a chatbot in place of a human interlocutor is becoming increasingly common across different areas of activity. This can generate mixed feelings depending on the context and subject addressed. On one hand, the speed and constant availability of chatbots in providing immediate responses to questions may be appreciated; on the other hand, people may feel a lack of human connection, which can generate frustration or distrust. The study investigates students' perceptions of communicating with a chatbot during the recruitment and selection process for employment. The qualitative methodology adopted included six focus group sessions conducted in March 2025 with over 120 third-year students from the Faculty of Automation and Computer Science at Politehnica University of Timisoara. The results reveal that when interaction with a chatbot also includes the evaluation of the subject, as occurs in the recruitment process, the nuances of emotional experiences are more pronounced and predominantly negative. The study also identifies concrete directions for improving the candidate experience, advocating for a hybrid recruitment model that combines technological efficiency with relational authenticity.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, chatbot, recruitment and selection, candidate experience, focus group, organisational communication, human resources

1. Introduction

The rapid emergence of digital technologies manifests prominently across all dimensions of everyday life, fundamentally reconfiguring the paradigms of interpersonal communication. In this context, technologically mediated interaction — particularly that carried out through artificial intelligence-based conversational agents (*chatbots*) — is gaining an increasingly significant presence across a variety of fields, from customer support services to educational and organisational environments. The substitution of the human interlocutor with an artificial agent generates heterogeneous affective responses, whose nature and intensity are modulated by the communicational context and the thematic stakes of the interaction.

This emotional complexity becomes particularly pronounced when the interaction with the conversational agent takes on an evaluative dimension, as occurs in the context of recruitment and personnel selection, where the high personal stakes significantly amplify the nuances of candidates' subjective experiences. While the constant availability and speed with which chatbots provide immediate responses may be perceived as significant advantages, the absence of authentic human connection can equally generate feelings of frustration, distrust, and depersonalisation. Thus, the human-chatbot interface is no longer merely an instrument for streamlining

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communication, but becomes a space for negotiating the individual's identity, competence, and affective state

2. Chatbots — definition, typologies and contexts of use

In the contemporary digital landscape, artificial intelligence-based conversational agents — known in the scholarly literature as *chatbots* — have experienced remarkable expansion, being increasingly used as mediating interfaces between users and digital services. Through their capacity to simplify access to information and to humanise interaction with complex computer systems, chatbots are redefining the paradigms of digital communication (Go & Sundar, 2019). Designed to engage users in conversations that simulate authentic interpersonal exchanges as faithfully as possible (Araujo, 2018; Scarpellini & Lim, 2020), they have progressively integrated into individuals' daily lives, assuming diverse functional roles: from that of a *"digital coach"* (Fleisch, Franz & Herrmann, 2021), guiding users in adopting desirable behaviours, to that of a *"virtual assistant"* (Youn & Jin, 2021), providing individualised real-time support regardless of location or time of day, through smartphones and other connected devices (Skjuve & Brandtzaeg, 2018; Wunderlich, Wangenheim & Bitner, 2012).

The motivations underlying users' interactions with conversational agents are multiple and heterogeneous, reflected in the growing diversity of chatbot typologies available on the market. At one pole of this spectrum are general-purpose voice assistants such as Siri (Apple Inc.) or Alexa (Amazon Inc.), broadly applicable systems designed to respond to a wide range of everyday requests. At the other pole are specialised chatbots oriented towards specific fields of activity: chatbots dedicated to mental health, such as Woebot, or scheduling and organisation assistants such as Amy and Andrew (x.ai Inc.), which operate within well-defined contexts, with precise objectives and a clearly defined target audience.

Another fundamental distinction in the taxonomy of chatbots concerns the *temporal profile* of the user-system interaction, a concept encompassing the prospective time horizon of chatbot use, the duration of individual sessions, and the frequency of interactions throughout the entire user-chatbot relationship (Baraka, Alves-Oliveira & Ribeiro, 2020). From this perspective, two main categories can be distinguished: chatbots designed for punctual, short-term interactions — such as those integrated into e-commerce platforms that assist users in locating a specific product (Chung, Ko, Joung & Kim, 2020) — and chatbots designed for recurring, long-term interactions, such as those used in medical contexts to support patients in managing chronic conditions (Kowatsch et al., 2018). This distinction has direct implications for the functional architecture and design strategies of conversational systems, as the design of a chatbot is fundamentally conditioned by the anticipated nature and intensity of the relationship with the user.

For the purposes of the present analysis, we adopt the definition proposed by Feine and colleagues, according to which chatbots are *"software-based systems designed to interact with humans via text-based natural language"* (Feine, Adam, Benke, Maedche & Benlian, 2020, p. 127), systems that imitate ordinary human-to-human conversations (Araujo, 2018) within the boundaries of a specific domain (Gnouche et al., 2018). This definition captures both the technical dimension of the phenomenon and its communicational purpose, providing an adequate conceptual framework for analysing the role of conversational agents in the context of recruitment and personnel selection.

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3. Recruitment and current challenges

Recruitment and personnel selection represent organisational processes of considerable complexity, involving a substantial consumption of temporal, human, and financial resources. Data provided by Gartner indicate that recruitment specialists allocate approximately one-third of their working time to screening application files, which generates significant pressure on operational efficiency and produces states of frustration among both recruiters and candidates involved in the process (Gartner, 2023). The magnitude of this challenge becomes even more evident when one considers that, on average, a single job advertisement attracts approximately 1,000 potential candidates, the high volume of applications placing considerable strain on the processing and evaluation capacity of human resources teams.

This reality is particularly felt by small-scale organisations, which, in the absence of dedicated infrastructure and specialised resources, face additional difficulties in the efficient management of application flows. The direct consequences of these limitations materialise in extended response times to candidates and in a diminished level of candidate engagement with the recruitment process, with negative effects on the candidate experience and, implicitly, on the organisation's image as an employer (employer branding).

4. Artificial Intelligence in Human Resources

4.1. Global adoption and benefits

Against the backdrop of increasing pressures faced by human resources departments, the adoption of artificial intelligence-based solutions has experienced remarkable expansion globally. According to data provided by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 88% of organisations worldwide have already integrated artificial intelligence technologies into their HR processes, fulfilling diverse and complementary roles: conversational agents used for disseminating information on organisational policies, systems for identifying and ranking candidates based on available data, and algorithms for recommending training and professional development programmes (SHRM, 2023).

Nevertheless, the implementation of these solutions has not entirely eliminated the structural difficulties of the recruitment process: 46% of organisations continue to report significant challenges in identifying and attracting candidates with the appropriate competency profile. From a prospective perspective, McKinsey & Company anticipates that 70% of companies will adopt artificial intelligence solutions by 2025, while also emphasising that nations investing actively in AI innovation will gain a considerable competitive economic advantage (McKinsey, 2023).

The adoption of artificial intelligence in human resources processes brings with it a series of documented benefits. By automating the stages of sourcing, candidate screening, and interview scheduling, AI-based solutions considerably reduce the time allocated to administrative tasks. The use of conversational agents contributes to increasing candidate engagement by ensuring continuous communication flows and significantly reduced response times. Furthermore, by centring algorithms on objective criteria — formal qualifications, relevant professional experience, and measurable competencies — AI systems can reduce the influence of cognitive biases and unconscious bias. Finally, 24% of organisations employ AI solutions with the explicit purpose of attracting candidates from a broader range of profiles, thereby contributing

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to the consolidation of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) principles at the organisational level.

4.2. Limitations and risks

Despite the documented benefits, the use of artificial intelligence in recruitment processes is not without limitations and risks. AI systems operate on the basis of patterns identified in training data, which may lead them to favour candidate profiles similar to those previously deemed successful — a phenomenon known in the scholarly literature as algorithmic bias. The performance of screening algorithms is directly conditioned by the accuracy and relevance of the data provided; the principle of garbage in, garbage out applies with equal force in the context of AI applications within the HR domain. Finally, the low degree of personalisation and human warmth characteristic of interactions mediated by conversational agents can negatively affect the candidate experience and the organisation's reputation as an employer.

5. Methodology

The present study adopted a qualitative approach, considered appropriate for the in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions, attitudes, and subjective experiences in relation to the use of artificial intelligence and conversational agents in recruitment contexts. The data collection method chosen was the focus group, widely recognised in the scholarly literature as an effective instrument for capturing group dynamics, diversity of opinion, and discursive nuances (Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015).

The study was conducted during March 2025 and included six focus group sessions organised with third-year students from the Faculty of Automation and Computer Science at Politehnica University of Timisoara. The total sample exceeded 120 participants, selected through purposive homogeneous sampling, with the primary inclusion criterion being enrolment in the same year of study and the same academic programme. The choice of students from the fields of automation and computer science as the target population holds methodological relevance, as they represent a demographic category with a high degree of exposure to technology.

Each focus group session was conducted on the basis of a structured interview guide, developed prior to the commencement of the research, which addressed two main thematic areas: exploring participants' general experiences and attitudes towards artificial intelligence, and investigating their specific perceptions regarding the use of chatbots in recruitment processes. The data collected were subjected to qualitative content analysis, with the aim of identifying recurring themes, discursive patterns, and relevant divergences of opinion.

6. Results

6.1. Students' perceptions and affective responses to chatbots in recruitment

The analysis of data collected during the six focus group sessions revealed a predominantly negative picture of students' perceptions regarding the prospect of interacting with an artificial conversational agent in the context of personnel selection. Although participants demonstrate a high level of familiarity with digital technologies, they expressed significant reservations about replacing the human interlocutor in

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recruitment stages — reservations articulated around a complex spectrum of negative affective experiences.

A first category of emotional responses identified concerns the feeling of annoyance, generated by the perception of the chatbot as an obstacle interposed between the candidate and authentic, human communication. Closely related to this, a significant number of participants reported feelings of anger, arising from the perception of being reduced to a mere data entry, to the detriment of recognition of their individual identity, professional aspirations, and accumulated personal experience.

Another recurring theme was that of discrimination, with students expressing concern that automated screening systems may operate on the basis of rigid criteria, generating inequities in the evaluation process. Participants also reported feelings of disappointment regarding the impossibility of building an authentic relationship with the organisation's representatives, suggesting that the relational experience within the recruitment process constitutes a determining factor in the formation of organisational attachment. This finding aligns with theoretical perspectives on candidate experience and its importance in consolidating employer branding.

Frustration represented another frequently invoked affective dimension, particularly in situations where the conversational agent proved incapable of providing responses to candidates' questions regarding the specifics of the position or the stages of the recruitment process. The feeling of disrespect constituted a particularly resonant theme, with participants interpreting the exclusive use of an artificial agent as an implicit signal of the employer's disinterest in the human relationship with the candidate. Finally, participants described a sense of inefficiency and wasted time, associated with interactions with conversational agents that failed to concretely advance the recruitment process.

7. Discussion

The findings of the present study highlight the need for a careful reconfiguration of how organisations implement artificial intelligence technologies in recruitment processes. In this regard, the data collected suggest three main directions of intervention with the potential to ameliorate the negative perceptions identified.

A first direction concerns the personalisation of technologically mediated interaction. Although conversational agents operate on the basis of predefined algorithms, they can be programmed to adopt a communicational register closer to the human, characterised by empathy, flexibility of expression, and the capacity for affective validation of the candidate. This approach falls within the broader framework of the concept of conversational design, which aims to optimise the user experience in interactions with automated systems (Shevat, 2017).

A second direction concerns the transparency of the recruitment process. Students expressed the need to understand the stages, criteria, and evaluation mechanisms involved, perceiving the lack of this information as a source of anxiety. Transparent communication contributes to consolidating the perception of procedural fairness, a concept with demonstrated relevance in the literature on organisational justice (Gilliland, 1993).

Finally, participants indicated as their preferred solution a balance between automation and human interaction. A hybrid recruitment model, in which the conversational agent manages the initial screening stages while the HR specialist

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intervenes in the stages of in-depth evaluation, best addresses both the efficiency needs of the organisation and the relational needs of candidates. This approach is supported by the scholarly literature, which recommends the integration of technology in HR not as a substitute for human judgement, but as an instrument for augmenting its capacities — an approach referred to as human-in-the-loop (Tambe et al., 2019).

8. Conclusions

The present study confirms that the integration of artificial intelligence in recruitment represents an inevitable and necessary strategic direction in the context of the accelerating digital transformation of the contemporary organisational environment. Nevertheless, the data collected warn that this integration must be carried out with discernment, responsibility, and a profound understanding of the human dimension of the selection process.

The study demonstrates that candidates' perceptions of chatbot use are not uniform, but vary according to the specific way in which these systems are implemented, calibrated, and communicated. A conversational agent perceived as rigid and impersonal can generate strongly negative affective responses, with direct consequences for the candidate experience and the organisation's reputation as an employer.

From the perspective of human resources practitioners, the findings convey a clear message: adapting to technology represents a condition of professional relevance, but must not come at the cost of abandoning the relational and empathetic dimension of the recruitment process. The continuous evaluation of AI system performance, the periodic updating of input data, and the monitoring of their impact become indispensable practices for any organisation aspiring to an ethical and effective implementation.

In closing, the study brings to the fore a fundamental reality: emotion, authenticity, and genuine human connection remain the exclusive province of the human being and cannot be replicated by any digital instrument, however sophisticated the algorithm. Future research could broaden this perspective by including more diverse samples in terms of academic and professional profile, by comparing the perceptions of candidates with those of recruiters, or by longitudinally investigating how technologically mediated recruitment experiences influence employment decisions and organisational attachment.

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