

BUSINESS VOICE

Crafting Recruitment as a Watershed Moment for Early Inclusion

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Abstract

Building inclusive workplaces remains a major challenge for contemporary organizations. Human resource management (HRM) is increasingly called upon to play a role in fostering inclusion, particularly through recruitment practices that aim to improve access for underrepresented groups. Yet, most approaches focus on recruitment outcomes related to fairness and diversity, often overlooking whether and how inclusion can be experienced during the hiring process. This paper examines the case of Team Jolokia, a French non-profit organization that has assembled unconventional ocean racing crews since 2012, with the goal of demonstrating that diversity can be a source of performance. The initiative, widely covered in the media and supported by institutional partners and corporate sponsors, has gained visibility and sparked interest from major companies. Drawing on an abductive qualitative study, we examine Team Jolokia's recruitment process, which we analyse as a sequence of interconnected stages (sourcing, application, assessment and selection). While initially designed to foster diversity, this process also gives rise to an early sense of inclusion among selected candidates. Our findings thus highlight the experiential dimension of recruitment, which can contribute to meeting individuals' needs for both uniqueness and belongingness. Building on this insight, we propose a relational and integrative view of inclusive recruitment, grounded in a human-centred philosophy, that challenges the conception of people as resources. This philosophy is articulated through five mutually reinforcing principles: 'anyone can apply', 'everyone has skills', 'social skills come first', 'vulnerability is not a problem' and 'fit with the mission and values is key'. Together, they serve as inclusive heuristics, forming a generative compass that can help organizations rethink recruitment as an inclusive experience.

Keywords: *Diversity; Inclusion; Inclusive recruitment; Case study*

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Recruitment practices are increasingly scrutinized for the biases that shape how candidates are evaluated and selected (Díaz et al., 2019), and more broadly for their role in reproducing exclusion (Rivera, 2012). Over time, these practices have evolved alongside significant societal and technological shifts (Aparna & Kumar, 2025), prompting questions about how organizations attract, select and engage candidates. A growing number of contributions now highlight the role of recruitment in fostering more inclusive workplaces (Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024; Lima et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, research on inclusive recruitment has often approached the topic from a corrective perspective, emphasizing strategies and practices to reduce unconscious bias and improve access for underrepresented or minority groups (Alburo et al., 2020; Ayoko & Fujimoto, 2023; Castillo et al., 2024; Kersten et al., 2023; Meacham et al., 2017). While these

contributions have been essential in advancing fairer recruitment practices, they are predominantly conceived from employers' standpoint, offering limited insight into how candidates may experience inclusion, even before formally joining the organization.

In this paper, we examine a unique empirical case: Team Jolokia, a French non-profit organization that has been assembling ocean racing crews composed of individuals from diverse backgrounds since 2012. Drawing on field observations, interviews conducted over the course of a full racing season, and internal documents, we adopted an abductive approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). Although our initial investigation aimed to understand how Team Jolokia's multi-stage recruitment process was designed to ensure diversity, we observed that this process also fostered an early sense of inclusion among future crew members. This unexpected

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finding led us to reframe our study and formulate the following research question: how can inclusion emerge through the recruitment experience?

Building on this atypical case, we develop a relational and integrative view of inclusive recruitment. We analyse how the recruitment process, conceived as a sequence of interrelated stages (sourcing, application, assessment and selection) and the associated practices intertwine and work together to create conditions for early inclusion. Thus, our contribution suggests that inclusive recruitment can take shape when it is informed by a human-centred philosophy that challenges the idea of individuals as mere resources, and when it is guided by a set of mutually reinforcing principles that serve as inclusive heuristics. These include 'anyone can apply', 'everyone has skills', 'social skills come first', 'vulnerability is not a problem' and 'fit with the mission and values is key'. The resulting framework serves as a reflective and generative compass for recruiters, offering guidance to reimagine recruitment as an inclusive experience for candidates, particularly in contexts characterized by temporary, project-based, or volunteer-based forms of organizing.

This article begins with a review of the literature on the role of human resource management (HRM) in fostering inclusive workplaces, focusing on the potential of recruitment as a pivotal moment for inclusion. We then present our empirical setting (Team Jolokia) and methodology, followed by our findings and discussion, which advance a more experiential approach to inclusive recruitment.

Literature review

The role of HRM in building inclusive workplaces

Inclusion at work has become a pressing issue for organizations worldwide (Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024; Özbilgin, 2009; Hofbauer & Podsiadlowski, 2014). Over the past decades, efforts to define and theorize inclusion have resulted in a variety of publications, from conceptual frameworks and literature reviews to practice-oriented contributions. For instance, Mor Barak and Cherin (1998) characterize inclusion in terms of employees' access to information and resources, involvement in work groups, and their ability to influence decision-making processes. Similarly, Pelled et al. (1999) define it as the degree to which employees are accepted and treated as insiders, reflected in decision-making influence, access to sensitive information and job security. Thus, inclusion can be understood as enabling employees to participate and contribute meaningfully to the organization (Roberson, 2006). However, recent research suggests that opening organizational processes to a broader range of actors, for instance in strategy-making, is not without challenges, as such efforts may give rise to tensions and uneven forms of participation across actors (Smith et al., 2018). Inclusion, therefore, cannot be assessed solely through

participation, as other dimensions also shape how individuals experience their place within the organization. Shore et al. (2011), for example, frame inclusion as the degree to which employees feel they are esteemed members of the group through the satisfaction of two basic human needs: belongingness and uniqueness. Their conceptualization emphasizes inclusion as a balance between connecting through shared beliefs, values and goals (Davidson, 1999) and feeling free to act authentically at work (Ferdman, 2010).

While inclusion at work is a matter of individual perception, it remains influenced by organizational factors. Scholars have highlighted, for instance, the role of inclusive climate (Nishii, 2013) as well as the critical influence of leaders in creating conditions that foster inclusion (Buengeler et al., 2018; Nishii & Leroy, 2022; Roberson & Perry, 2022; Shore & Chung, 2022). Such climate and leadership can be seen as components of the broader notion of the inclusive workplace, an environment where all employees feel respected and engaged (Booyesen, 2013; Mor Barak, 2000, 2010; Mor Barak & Daya, 2013). Building on an extensive review of prior studies, Shore et al. (2018) further proposed a conceptual model of inclusive workplaces, emphasizing that inclusion requires practices and processes to be consistently implemented throughout the organization. Figure 1 summarizes the core themes they identified as essential to inclusive workplaces.

As Holvino et al. (2004) emphasize, achieving and sustaining such workplaces requires organizational change at multiple levels: systemic, cultural and behavioural. In this respect,

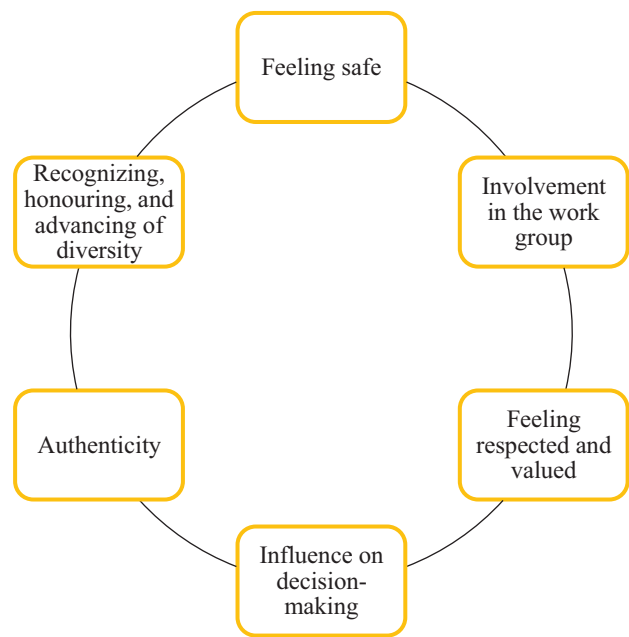


Figure 1. Components of an inclusive workplace
Source: Own elaboration; adapted from Shore et al. (2018).

HRM has been identified as a strategic lever for crafting inclusive workplaces, as it shapes many practices and processes that directly affect employees' experience (Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024; Meacham et al., 2017). This influence spans the entire employee lifecycle, through initiatives that may foster inclusion at every stage (Lima et al., 2025). In a similar vein, Ayoko and Fujimoto (2023) call for an 'inclusive HRM' operating across various domains, including recruitment, training, performance appraisal and rewards. More specifically, recruitment, defined as the process of identifying and attracting potential candidates from outside the organization to fill vacant positions (Searle & Al-Sharif, 2018), represents a pivotal moment at the onset of employment. It unfolds as a series of interconnected stages, each enacted through specific practices that can influence candidates' experience and their subsequent engagement with the organization. However, most conceptualizations of inclusion focus on employees' experience within organizations. Turning to recruitment widens the lens, inviting us to consider inclusion as a relevant concern even before formal organizational entry. Recruitment thus emerges as a critical juncture, one that can reveal whether and how an organization genuinely enacts its commitment to being an inclusive workplace.

Is recruitment an inclusive experience?

Publications across diverse fields have already addressed the role of recruitment in supporting diversity and inclusion, for instance, in medicine (Coleman et al., 2021; Dossett et al., 2019), higher education (Castillo et al., 2024), and academic libraries (Alburo et al., 2020; Poo et al., 2024). While some of these contributions only briefly mention inclusive recruitment without detailing specific practices, others provide more concrete insights and examples. Within the management and HRM literature, similar concerns have emerged (Avery et al., 2013), sometimes through explicit mentions of inclusive recruitment (Meacham et al., 2017). According to Eshete and Birbirssa (2024), the first activity of HRM consists of designing and implementing a recruitment and selection strategy. They emphasize that this process can support inclusive workplaces when attention is paid to multiple stages, from the wording of job postings and candidate selection to onboarding practices. These elements, which reflect an inclusive approach to recruitment even if the authors do not use the term explicitly, echo challenges and opportunities identified more broadly in the literature.

One central issue concerns sourcing, with scholars stressing, for instance, the importance of revising job descriptions to avoid biased wording and to encourage applications from diverse candidates (Lima et al., 2025). Examining the case of neurodiverse workers, Walkowiak (2024) highlights the potential of digital tools and artificial intelligence to broaden

recruiting grounds and facilitate better matching between applicants and organizations, while also reducing bias during the screening phase. Moreover, traditional recruitment tools such as CVs and interviews have also been criticized for serving as biased proxies for performance (Cappelli et al., 2019). CVs restrict assessment to past trajectories, while interviews rely heavily on candidates' ability to present themselves and communicate convincingly. Interviews appear as a moment particularly prone to activating stereotypes and unconscious bias, potentially disadvantaging certain profiles such as neurodiverse individuals, for whom task-based assessments may be more appropriate (Walkowiak, 2024). The diversification of assessment methods resonates with earlier contributions. For instance, Pless and Maak (2004) advocate for the use of multiple exercises (e.g. role plays, interviews) led by trained recruiters. Beyond internal efforts and resources, organizations may also benefit from working with diversity consultants who can help mitigate unconscious bias in decision-making and, in turn, enhance recruitment inclusiveness (Lima et al., 2025). Alongside these academic contributions, recent practitioner publications also highlight the growing importance of inclusive recruitment, along with the willingness and efforts to operationalize it through concrete guidelines and tools (Woods & Tharakan, 2021). Thus, existing literature already offers multiple levers to make recruitment more inclusive, notably through fair and equitable practices. Building on this literature, this paper adopts the candidates' standpoint to examine inclusion as a subjective and lived phenomenon, in line with calls to better understand experiences of inclusion at work (Shore et al., 2018).

Methodology

Case selection

In 2016, at a World Forum for a Responsible Economy conference, one of the authors discovered Team Jolokia, a French non-profit organization that promotes diversity through ocean racing. Since its creation in 2012, the project has aimed to build unconventional crews: 'There's a big difference. Usually, crews are mainly made up of men between 30 and 40 years old, highly trained ...' (Crew member #3). Each year, the crew is partially renewed through a recurring recruitment process designed to welcome individuals from diverse gender, age, nationality and social, professional and nautical backgrounds (see Appendix I for the composition of the 2018 crew). Crews have also included members with physical disabilities across different seasons, including cases of blindness and tetraplegia. Deliberately built outside the standards of ocean racing, these crews were often labelled by expert sailors as 'lame ducks', expected to show limited potential in terms of sailing performance. Yet, over the years, they have consistently

managed to sail Team Jolokia's demanding VOR 60, often described as a 'Formula One of the seas', and to achieve strong rankings in several prestigious French and European races.

Team Jolokia originated from a previous project (Défi intégration) that aimed to sail with a mixed crew of disabled and able-bodied individuals. As the co-founder later reflected, focusing on a single minority group might have risked reinforcing existing stereotypes. Consequently, they decided to broaden the crew's composition to include a wider range of profiles and, for the first time, to take part in offshore racing competitions. This marked the birth of Team Jolokia, which from the outset benefited from strong institutional support, notably through a partnership with the French Navy for the recruitment and training of crew members.

This strong backing and the involvement of prominent sponsors quickly gave the project significant visibility. Team Jolokia has thus received widespread media coverage, including documentaries and features on television and radio, numerous articles in national, regional, and specialized press, as well as a graphic novel and several exhibitions. It also won various awards from foundations, think tanks, and the French Ministry of Economy and Finance. Team Jolokia has also forged partnerships with various stakeholders, such as some ministries, the French Association of Diversity Managers, and several major French companies.

Intrigued by Team Jolokia's deliberate commitment to recruiting atypical profiles, we initiated a collaboration with key actors involved in the project, with the aim of theorizing the

practices implemented in this context (Wooten, 2008). As research in management has long recognized that sports teams provide valuable insights into collective functioning (Bouty & Drucker-Godard, 2019; Maani & Benton, 1999), Team Jolokia offered a promising case for both conceptual exploration and managerial inspiration.

Data collection and analysis

We adopted a qualitative approach to gain in-depth insights into this unique diversity laboratory. Our fieldwork involved both interactions with Team Jolokia's permanent staff and volunteers, and immersion within the 2018 sailing crew, enabling us to capture multiple perspectives on its practices. Table I provides an overview of our data sources and how they were mobilized in the analytical process.

As we engaged with the data, we gradually realized that the recruitment phase was not only operationally critical, but also pivotal for the early emergence of inclusion. This was unexpected, as inclusion was not a deliberate or even implicit goal from the recruiters' perspective: their focus was on assembling a diverse crew. Yet, in their retrospective accounts, many crew members described recruitment as a turning point, one where they felt recognized, welcomed, and emotionally connected. This finding redirected our analytical focus towards the experience of inclusion itself, emphasizing the importance of examining inclusion through the candidates' standpoint. This

Table I. Data sources and role in the analysis

| Data source | Type of data | Role in the analysis |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Interviews (2,483 min) | Interviews (24) with stakeholders involved in the recruitment of future crew members including the co-founder and director of Team Jolokia, the skipper, volunteers, and French Navy psychologists. Interviews (16) with the members of the 2018 crew. | Familiarize with the organizational context and understand how the recruitment of future crew members was conducted. Produce a map of practices. Understand how the recruitment was experienced by crew members as inclusion is a personal and subjective feeling (Ferdman, 2013). |
| Observations (approx. 11 days) | Field notes from key events of the 2018 season: recruitment session, training and team building sessions, races. Informal conversations with the co-founder and director of Team Jolokia, the skipper, the sports coach, crew members, and French Navy personnel involved in training activities. | Observe recruitment practices in action and capture elements not made explicit during interviews. Collect recruitment artefacts. Produce a map of practices. |
| Media | Press reviews from 2012 to 2022 (601 pages). Videos: reports and documentaries, recruitment trailers, etc. (240 min). | Complement and triangulate interview data. Familiarize with the organizational context. Complement and triangulate data from interviews and observations. |
| Documents | Internal and institutional documents, newsletters, Team Jolokia's website, emails sent to the crew, etc. (389 pages). | Familiarize with the organizational context. Complement and triangulate data from interviews and observations. |

Source: Own elaboration.

orientation echoes Shore et al.'s (2018) call to deepen our understanding of inclusion experiences and Bryer's (2020) invitation to draw lessons from alternative organizational contexts. We therefore turned to Shore et al.'s (2011) inclusion framework to better interpret the dynamics at play. This framework helped us make sense of how inclusion took shape not only through formal recruitment procedures but also through a constellation of practices and behaviours. We used it to guide our attention during data analysis, in line with an abductive posture (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). This analytical shift led us to focus on recruitment as both a process of interrelated stages (sourcing, application, assessment, and selection) and a set of embedded practices that foster early inclusion through uniqueness and belongingness.

Findings

From sourcing to selection: How inclusion is progressively experienced by future Team Jolokia's crew members

Team Jolokia's recruitment campaign is conducted annually through four main stages (see Figure 2).

During the final two stages, Team Jolokia relies on the involvement of both a diversity and inclusion consultant (founder of Just Different) and French Navy psychologists, whose experience in recruiting sailors and assembling effective crews is well established. The French Navy is also historically recognized for drawing individuals from diverse social backgrounds, including the most disadvantaged, and more recently for its efforts to promote gender diversity. Beyond offering recruitment expertise and logistical support (some tests are held at the French Navy's facilities in Vincennes), this partnership leaves a lasting impression on candidates and enhances Team Jolokia's appeal. While the figure outlines the process, the following sections examine how each stage is enacted in practice.

Sourcing

Each year, Team Jolokia launches a recruitment campaign through various communication channels, including a press kit, a website and a video teaser, to reach and attract applicants:

'Since 2012, Team Jolokia has been sailing an exceptional 60-foot boat designed for round-the-world racing, with extraordinary crews of 20 individuals, representing diverse forms of diversity: social background, gender, age, disability (including paraplegia, visual and hearing impairments) and nationality (Italian, Spanish, Canadian, Chinese, German, etc.). This unique crew, unprecedented in the world of off-shore racing, mirrors society's diversity. Team Jolokia's goal is to demonstrate that diversity is a source of collective wealth and performance. Our differences are our strength.'

Source: Team Jolokia (translation by the authors).

Team Jolokia stands out for its 'genuine willingness to ensure diversity in candidate sourcing' (diversity and inclusion consultant). For instance, rather than advertising specific positions on board, Team Jolokia issues a single open call for applications, as roles are assigned only after the initial training sessions:

'Who can apply to Team Jolokia? Any adult (over eighteen), regardless of income, social background, nationality, age, religion, physical appearance, etc. No financial participation is required to sail on our boat. Crew members are volunteers. You must only pay for your trips to Team Jolokia's home port and your meals. For those with limited income, grants are available on request as we want to enable anyone to sail.'

Source: Team Jolokia; our translation.

This reflects its commitment to welcoming individuals from diverse backgrounds: 'Since there is no job profile, there is no ideal profile' (diversity and inclusion consultant). This openness is perceived by the candidates as an implicit recognition of their uniqueness: 'I thought, "Hey, maybe I'll get some attention because I have an atypical profile," [...] and that, for once, I might have a place here' (Crew member #7). When aligned with their personal values, this openness generates enthusiasm and emotionally engages candidates from the very first stages of the recruitment process: 'What really struck me, and aligns

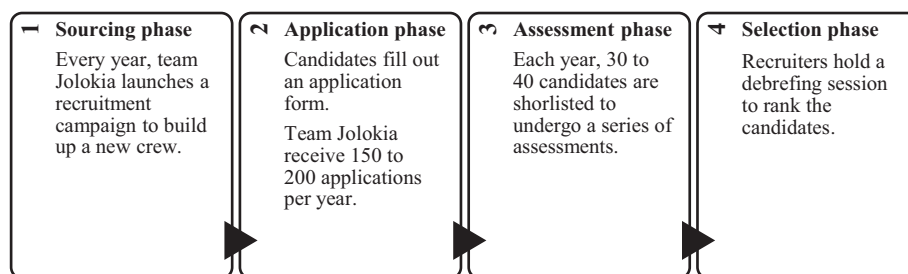


Figure 2. Overview of Team Jolokia's recruitment campaign
Source: Own elaboration.

with the values I hold personally in my life and work, is how open it is. There are very few constraints, very few barriers. Even to apply, you're not asked to do anything except talk about yourself. [...] You don't have to know anything about sailing. It was incredibly open, and I thought that was amazing' (Crew member #20).

Team Jolokia's boat is also a powerful attraction. It is perceived as a prestigious object, usually reserved for elite, professional or affluent sailors. Team Jolokia reverses this dynamic of exclusivity by making the inaccessible accessible: 'It's an incredible opportunity to sail on a boat like that. [...] It was open to everyone, and that's really very rare, actually' (Crew member #6). This striking contrast, between the symbolic prestige of the boat and its complete openness, makes the project particularly appealing to candidates. The boat is thus deliberately reimagined as a floating laboratory for diversity to challenge representations and inspire societal and managerial change.

While Team Jolokia aims to open recruitment to people from diverse backgrounds, significant challenges remain in turning this vision into reality: 'Who responds to this call for applications? [...] Who even sees it? Who thinks to themselves, "I can apply"?' (co-founder and director of Team Jolokia). Over time, Team Jolokia has adjusted its recruitment messaging to ensure that individuals, especially beginners, women or people with disabilities, do not feel discouraged or unqualified to apply. One example is a series of short, punchy statements designed to challenge common misconceptions about offshore sailing (see Appendix 2). The last three vignettes emphasize what truly matters to Team Jolokia: being oneself, the willingness to connect with others, and the readiness to step out of one's comfort zone. These messages convey both the recognition of individual uniqueness and the desire for belongingness, while also underlining the idea of surpassing oneself.

Self-transcendence, both physically and relationally, also features prominently in the recruitment trailers, through expressions such as 'hazardous travels', 'no pay, spartan life', 'hard work and ruthless tasks', or even 'commitment and courtesy required'. The tone is deliberately bold and provocative, with phrases like 'priority given to social or physical misfits' or 'this is not a freak show, but normal people should refrain from applying'. Yet, this tone is also ambiguous. While it appeals to those drawn to challenge and diversity, the message may inadvertently deter individuals who do not perceive themselves as different enough. As one candidate shared, 'I thought I was too normal' (Crew member #19), explaining that the first time she saw the video, she considered applying but eventually gave up. Following the 2018 season, Team Jolokia developed a new video for the next recruitment campaign. It adopted a warmer and more personal tone by giving voice to crew members. While self-transcendence remained central in their discourse,

conviviality also emerged as a key aspect of the lived experience, notably through expressions like 'hard work but a lot of fun and joy'. References to 'being part of an amazing team' or even 'a family' reflect the sense of belonging experienced by crew members. Through the recruitment trailer, this narrative becomes an attractive promise of inclusion.

Thus, sourcing is critical for both Team Jolokia and prospective candidates. For Team Jolokia, this is the phase during which the foundation for a diverse crew is laid. Active efforts are therefore made to encourage applications. The main challenge lies in removing barriers while striking a subtle balance between projecting a bold vision of the project and maintaining an inclusive tone. Yet, openness does not imply the absence of selection. Team Jolokia's messaging centred on engagement and self-transcendence acts as a filter, not to exclude, but to attract individuals drawn to physical challenge and a deeply human, relational experience. Many crew members described how Team Jolokia's messaging resonated with their personal stories and values, and ultimately sparked their desire to apply. Its mission acts as a magnet, offering a meaningful space for personal identification and social engagement: 'It's also mainly about the human experience and the strong message it conveys about management [...] I really like the idea of leading by example' (Crew member #5).

Application

Team Jolokia has developed a structured application form with specific questions:

- Why do you want to join Team Jolokia?
- Being part of Team Jolokia's crew means having the opportunity to participate in sailing races aboard an exceptional boat, with the aim of proving the value of diversity. How would you like to get involved?
- If you already have sailing experience, please describe it in detail. If you're a beginner, that's perfectly fine; we also recruit beginners!
- Do you exercise regularly? If so, tell us what you do. We want to know!
- Have you ever been involved in a non-profit or had any volunteering experience?
- How many days per month do you plan to dedicate to Team Jolokia?
- Are you willing to spend 8 days or more at sea?
- What obstacles or challenges could prevent you from committing to this project despite your willingness to do so?

Source: Team Jolokia; our translation.

This application form, which is used to preselect candidates, reflects a deliberate effort to foster inclusivity. Over the years, Team Jolokia has taken steps to enable diverse individuals to apply: 'We use spoken language and simpler sentences [...]. Basically, we made it more accessible. [For example], applicants

who aren't comfortable writing can answer questions by phone [...] or by video' (co-founder and director of Team Jolokia). All questions are open-ended. They enable candidates to engage in personal reflection on their intrinsic motivations and values. Candidates can thus articulate their potential contribution to Team Jolokia's project. Some questions are explicitly formulated to reduce self-imposed limitations, for instance, for beginners. Candidates are also invited to share their doubts or personal challenges openly. In doing so, the application form conveys the message that vulnerabilities are not seen as disqualifying but rather as legitimate aspects of one's identity, thereby fostering candidates' authenticity:

'I thought it was great because, compared to a typical job application, where you're usually invited to talk about what you can bring to the table, what's positive, etc., [...] Either you're confident enough to share your own limitations [...] but then you might quickly think: "Gee, I'm closing doors for myself!" And here, it was the opposite. It was "Tell us about your difficulties, because everyone has them and they just need to be acknowledged." So, it was very straightforward, because in the end, it was a way of introducing yourself with complete transparency. [...] There was no need to make the application look better'. (Crew member #8)

Thus, the application form engages candidates in a reflective journey. Several questions also subtly function as implicit indicators of a disposition for self-transcendence, particularly those concerning physical activity and willingness to spend extended periods at sea.

Finally, candidates can attach a document of their choice to their application. For instance, one candidate included a prayer by Mother Teresa. She later explained that '[it] deeply resonated with me and [...] [was] truly aligned with Team Jolokia's project' (Crew member #3). The way some candidates use this open-ended section of the form suggests that it offers a space to personalize their application, expressing both their individuality and alignment with Team Jolokia's mission and values.

Assessment

A few weeks after submitting their applications, shortlisted candidates participate in a series of assessments held at the premises of the French Navy and at a water sports centre. These include a personality test (the Big Five), a group decision-making exercise, interviews, a physical test session, and practical nautical exercises. A written nautical knowledge test is also administered to candidates with prior sailing experience. Measures are being implemented to minimize the influence of personal biases and 'gut feelings' in the evaluation of candidates. First, a diverse panel of evaluators is involved, including Team Jolokia's skipper, psychologists, a sports coach, former crew members, and volunteers. On average, candidates are assessed by six different individuals. Additionally, a

criterion-based grid is used to assess candidates in different areas: availability, sailing experience, motivation and ability to work in a team, motivation for sport and disposition towards self-transcendence, as well as personal resonance with Team Jolokia's project.

The variety of contexts in which candidates are placed is guided by two core convictions: first, that skills are context-dependent, meaning an individual's performance can be influenced by a variety of factors, such as the format of tests, the nature of recruitment tools, their current state of mind, and their level of self-confidence; and second, that traditional interviews may not accommodate all candidates: 'Some people are more comfortable talking, others more comfortable taking action. What matters most to us are your invisible skills, which we aim to make visible' (co-founder and director of Team Jolokia). This approach underpins Team Jolokia's effort to offer each candidate multiple opportunities to reveal their potential.

While ocean racing typically demands both physical strength and endurance, as well as sailing expertise, Team Jolokia places the greatest emphasis on social skills. Interviews and collective tests are distinct but complementary contexts used to assess candidates' motivation and ability to actively engage within a team. Recruiters explore whether candidates demonstrate a collaborative mindset, openness to others, and willingness to contribute to team cohesion. They also look for signs of self-awareness and adaptability, qualities they consider essential for life on board. Taken together, these elements offer insight into a candidate's inclusiveness.

Interestingly, some candidates have noticed the recruiters' attention during some tests. One crew member described how it gave her a positive impression:

'I had fallen off my bike three days before the assessments, so my knee was hurting. During [the physical test], I had to put my wool hat under my knee [...] He [the sports coach] immediately noticed [...] For me, that was a clear sign that someone was paying attention. I really liked that. I thought, "If they're capable of this kind of attention to others, that's a good sign." The same goes for the skipper during the practical test on the water. He had just one expression, one word, one look that conveyed to me that these were human beings who care about others.' (Crew member #19)

Such moments, though anecdotal, suggest that attention to inclusiveness is not one-sided: candidates, too, observe and interpret recruiters' attitudes. This contributes to the experience of recruitment as a relational encounter in which vulnerability is neither overlooked nor treated as a problem.

While physical or collective tests rarely allow for in-depth discussion, the interviews, particularly those conducted by the French Navy psychologists, provide a more dialogic space: 'I felt a real benevolence. The psychologists had a real ability to ask questions. You could really feel that they were listening. There was no judgment' (Crew member #3). These interactions are

perceived as moments when uncomfortable topics can be explored, enabling authentic and constructive conversations. While the interviews with Team Jolokia's recruiters are more structured, they are also perceived as conducive to authenticity:

'I remember there were targeted questions that allowed us the freedom to express ourselves through our background and personal story. I believe it was through those questions that each person was able to convey a uniqueness that could be recognized.' (Crew member #3)

More spontaneous forms of personal expression also emerge during interviews. We witnessed, for example, a candidate performing a slam about diversity. This moment, though exceptional, resonates with what several candidates shared with us, namely, that they felt genuinely free to be themselves. These interviews, in continuity with the earlier stages of the process, offer candidates multiple opportunities to express their individuality while connecting with Team Jolokia's mission.

Finally, we also observed that the assessment phase is particularly critical for the future crew relationships: 'The selection process, without you even realizing it, is something you experience together. Even if you don't know each other, there are already people you recognize and will see again when you are selected. There's already a connection, an initial bond' (Crew member #7). It seems that being shortlisted fosters a collective dynamic, despite the fact that the process ultimately remains selective: 'It felt like we were part of something, and we wanted to support each other' (Crew member #4). For instance, some candidates connect during the physical test, even though it involves individual assessments of athletic performance and self-transcendence. It nonetheless constitutes an early shared experience that helps shape future relationships:

'We met while doing push-ups [...] It instantly created a bond, and he was the one who motivated me to finish the session. [...] There were other nice people too, so it really felt like a great team' (Crew member #2). Moreover, the waiting periods between tests are far from being downtime: they provide opportunities for interactions: 'I was expecting more direct competition, and I clearly didn't get it. So, I felt pretty relaxed and started games in the waiting rooms because it took a while. Yeah, it was cool!' (Crew member #5). Physical spaces thus become places where candidates meet and engage with one another. As one candidate recalled: 'We ended up chatting in the hallways in Vincennes, or later at the water sports centre, and eventually became friends' (Crew member #4). Several crew members reported that these early connections helped foster team cohesion, as if a sense of belonging had already begun to blossom during the assessments.

Selection

Following the assessments, recruiters gather to review and share the scores they assigned to each criterion, and ultimately establish a ranking of the candidates. Throughout these discussions, conscious and sustained efforts are made to avoid intuitive decision-making. Acting as an 'inclusive watchdog', the co-founder and director of Team Jolokia consistently steers the conversation back to the assessed skills.

At this stage, both the French Navy psychologists and the physical trainer provide critical insights into candidates' compatibility with life on board and the demands of ocean racing. By interpreting behavioural and discursive cues captured during the assessment phase, psychologists help infer candidates' potential for inclusiveness (see Table 2).

Table 2. Candidates' potential inclusiveness

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Cues of potential inclusiveness | 'During the group test, [...] he took the lead without belittling the others, as a good coach, he pays attention to their personal development.' |
| | 'During the group test, [...] he stepped in to refocus the group and remind them of the goal. Very pragmatic, very benevolent, very empathic. I would see him as a reliable pillar.' |
| | 'She is quite open to new experiences [...] When I say that she is introspective, I mean that she is aware of her strengths (attention to others, perseverance), but also of her weaknesses. [...] She is able to understand and learn from her mistakes.' |
| | 'I think she is naturally open to appreciating the others in their uniqueness.' |
| Cues of limited inclusiveness | 'He likes to think outside the box. [...] He is driven by team spirit and sharing. [...] He has a strong mindset. He is not afraid to push himself beyond his limits.' |
| | 'A dominant, inflexible personality. This was noticeable during the group test.' |
| | 'Someone very driven by her own desires. She sees herself as selfish and she claims it. I think this will be difficult in a collective setting.' |
| | 'I am not sure he would be open to questioning himself when faced with remarks.' |
| | 'Someone sociable and open to others, but who holds back. In other words, he is more inclined to take than to give.' |
| | 'Limited hindsight [...] She even questions her ability to be open to different viewpoints. During the group test, she directly took the lead, even if it meant challenging others and imposing her opinion.' |

Source: Extracts from the French Navy psychologists' comments during the collective debriefing.

While vulnerability is acknowledged and even encouraged, any sign that might endanger physical safety, mental health or crew cohesion can lead psychologists to express some reservations. Through their external and expert perspective, they help recruiters reduce uncertainty and prevent mismatches that could undermine the future crew dynamics: 'Several times, they [the psychologists] warned us [...] that this person could be problematic in a group' (Team Jolokia treasurer and recruitment team member). The psychologists also comment on candidates' motivations, thereby providing cues about their potential alignment with Team Jolokia's mission (see Table 3).

Finally, another important dimension emerges in the selection phase. Although they strive to rely solely on predefined criteria, cross-assessment, and collective deliberation, recruiters remain concerned that the resulting crew may not be sufficiently diverse. Affirmative action therefore remains open to discussion as a potential means to preserve Team Jolokia's identity as a 'laboratory of diversity' (secondary data). This reveals a recurring tension between avoiding quota-based approaches and ensuring what is perceived as adequate diversity.

Five principles that make Team Jolokia's recruitment an inclusive experience

Our findings reveal that Team Jolokia's multi-stage recruitment process, initially designed to ensure crew diversity, also generates, from the candidates' perspective, an early sense of inclusion. Various practices encourage personal and authentic expression among candidates, enabling them to feel that their uniqueness is both recognized and valued. In addition, identification with Team Jolokia's project fosters an emerging

sense of belonging, which is further nurtured during the assessment phase through interactions with others. These feelings of uniqueness and belonging are thus activated and reinforced from sourcing through to final selection, making the recruitment process an inclusive experience. Building on this analysis, we identify five transversal principles that make visible the inclusive rationales underpinning Team Jolokia's approach (see Figure 3). Appendix 3 illustrates how these principles are translated into practice throughout the recruitment process.

Discussion

Rethinking recruitment as an experience of inclusion

Prior research has increasingly emphasized inclusive recruitment, yet mostly as a corrective mechanism aimed at enhancing diversity through improved access to employment for underrepresented or vulnerable groups (Ayoko & Fujimoto, 2023; Gröschl, 2007; Kersten et al., 2023; Lima et al., 2025; Meacham et al., 2017; Pio & Syed, 2018). In this view, organizations are expected to first diversify their workforce, notably by mitigating unconscious bias in selection processes, and only later engage in managerial efforts to include their employees. Our findings challenge this sequential logic by shifting attention from preventing exclusion to understanding how inclusion can be cultivated as a lived experience from the earliest stages of recruitment. Building on this perspective, we now discuss the five principles that emerged from our analysis and that, together, capture how diversity and inclusion can be fostered

Table 3. Candidates' potential alignment with Team Jolokia's mission

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Cues of alignment | 'In terms of motivation, I found him authentic and sincere, especially in his desire to be part of a crew promoting diversity.' 'A reserved girl [...] who idealizes the project [...] and wants to live an extraordinary human experience.' 'Her personal development, life story, and the project converge. She describes it as a political project.' |
| Cues of misalignment | 'Someone attracted to the project, but who has never spoken about diversity.' 'He [...] is quite individualistic [...], as when asked "Why Jolokia?", he replied: "Because it is better than a simple sailing school!" I wondered a lot about the implications in terms of commitment.' |

Source: Extracts from the French Navy psychologists' comments during the collective debriefing.

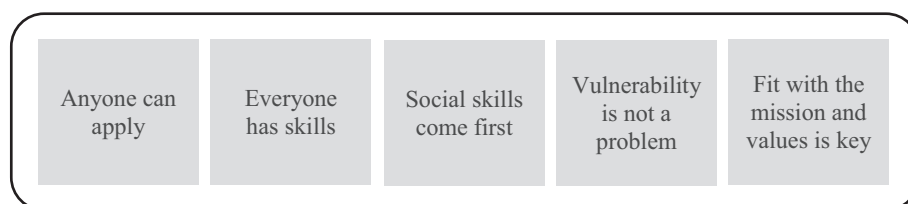


Figure 3. Five inclusive principles shaping recruitment at Team Jolokia
Source: Own elaboration

simultaneously through recruitment. These principles offer both theoretical grounding and practical guidance for understanding and implementing inclusive recruitment.

The principle 'anyone can apply' invites us to think of recruitment as a process grounded in openness (Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024). It challenges the presumed neutrality of sourcing by showing how references to an 'ideal' background (e.g. degrees or experience), along with implicit signals embedded in recruitment messaging, can discourage certain candidates. This echoes recent findings underlining the importance of writing inclusive job descriptions and broadening applicant pools (Castillo et al., 2024), positioning sourcing as a pivotal moment for inclusion (Walkowiak, 2024). Beyond who sees the opportunity, it is about who feels addressed and welcome to apply (Lima et al., 2025). Prior research shows that recruitment messaging shapes individuals' intention to apply (Alahakoon et al., 2024; Avery, 2003; Backhaus et al., 2002; Roberson et al., 2005), notably by broadening perceptions of who is suited for the job (Avery & McKay, 2006; Ng & Burke, 2005). Our findings suggest that inclusive recruitment relies on a sourcing strategy that activates both personal identification and a desire for belonging. This approach aligns with developmental perspectives that emphasize individuality and community in organizational communication (Jackson, 2023).

The principle 'everyone has skills' reframes competence as dynamic, contextual and often latent. Rather than viewing skills as fixed attributes that are readily observable, it emphasizes their situated, embodied, and deeply personal nature (Sandberg, 2000; Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009). Inclusive recruitment thus relies on varied and adaptive assessment contexts (Pless & Maak, 2004; Walkowiak, 2024) that act as revelatory spaces, allowing individuals to express themselves and be recognized for their potential contributions. This involves not only diversifying assessment tools, but also multiplying contexts (individual vs. collective, indoor vs. outdoor, formal vs. informal), as different environments may reveal different facets of candidates. It also implies engaging multiple assessors to bring diverse perspectives and using criteria-based evaluation to ensure greater consistency and fairness, possibly supported by external expertise when relevant (Lima et al., 2025). By enabling a more contextualized and equitable assessment of candidates' potential, this principle contributes to expanding the understanding of competence and promoting more inclusive forms of evaluation.

The principle 'social skills come first' highlights relational competence as an enabler of inclusion, suggesting that inclusive organizations also depend on employees' ability and willingness to engage respectfully and constructively with others. While technical expertise remains important, our study echoes research on the growing importance of social skills (Deming, 2017; Deming & Kahn, 2018; Josten & Lordan, 2021), highlighting the value of both intra- and interpersonal dispositions in

fostering inclusion. Our analysis suggests that individuals contribute to inclusion not only by expressing their own uniqueness (Ferdman & Roberts, 2013), but also by making space for others to do so (Malik, 2023). Rather than viewing inclusiveness as a stable individual trait, we conceptualize it as a dynamic configuration of dispositions, such as self-awareness (Wasserman et al., 2007), reflexivity (Booyesen, 2013), openness to diverse viewpoints (Pless & Maak, 2004) and self-transcendence (Ferdman, 2013), which can be cultivated over time and across contexts. From this developmental perspective, we therefore introduce the notion of 'inclusive potential' to refer to an individual's capacity to enact inclusion. Finally, our contribution shifts the focus beyond inclusive leadership (Buengeler et al., 2018; Carmeli et al., 2010; Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Nishii & Leroy, 2020; Roberson & Perry, 2022; Shore & Chung, 2022). In contrast, it posits inclusion as a collective and multilevel responsibility shared by all organizational members and enacted through daily interactions (Carden, 2025; Ferdman, 2013; Josten & Lordan, 2021; Meacham et al., 2017; Mor Barak et al., 2016).

The principle 'vulnerability is not a problem' challenges the assumption that vulnerability is inherently problematic or disqualifying in the context of recruitment. Our findings underline its contextual and relational nature, showing that when acknowledged and accepted, vulnerability can lead to more authentic and human-centred interactions throughout the recruitment process (Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024). While previous research has examined the link between inclusive leadership and psychological safety (Carmeli et al., 2010; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Woods et al., 2024), our findings suggest that a similar dynamic may emerge before organizational entry, through inclusive recruitment. This resonates with Ståsett's (2007) view of vulnerability as a fundamental human condition that calls for ethical recognition and enables moral agency. More broadly, our findings resonate with recent contributions that reconsider the value of vulnerability in organizational settings (Corlett et al., 2019, 2021) and align with perspectives that conceive openness to vulnerability as a relational condition for inclusion (Clark, 2020; Cottrill et al., 2014; Wasserman, 2020). Our study thus offers empirical insights that may inform future research on vulnerability in organizations.

The principle 'fit with the mission and values is key' suggests that inclusive recruitment implies a reciprocal recognition between potential candidates and organizations. Our findings show that individuals who perceive a strong compatibility between their personal trajectories and the organization's narrative often experience an early resonance. This can lead them to apply as a way of expressing both their identity and envisioned contribution to the organizational project. Our findings align with recent studies linking person-organization fit and inclusion (Chen & Tang, 2022; Demir et al., 2025). While these works emphasize how perceived value alignment fosters

inclusion once individuals are employed, our results extend this perspective by suggesting that such alignment can foster a sense of inclusion even before formal organizational entry. In this way, inclusive recruitment can be understood as a transitional space where individuals project their values, aspirations and identities, and explore whether these resonate with the organization's discourse. Beyond this initial projection, each stage of the recruitment process can serve as a space for self-expression and alignment, sometimes in highly personal and creative ways.

From human resources to human beings

More broadly, these five principles invite a reconsideration of how organizations conceive their relationship with individuals who consider joining them. The dominant utilitarian framing of

people as 'human resources' assigns them a passive role, reducing individuals to assets to be managed (Greenwood, 2002, 2013; Inkson, 2008; Van Buren et al., 2011). Such instrumental logic may foster depersonalized and dehumanized employment relationships (De Gama et al., 2012), which in turn may hinder the emergence of inclusion. In contrast, inclusive recruitment involves seeing individuals not as predictable resources, but as singular, sometimes vulnerable, and contextually embedded human beings. This approach resonates with Shore et al. (2011), who view inclusion as rooted in universal human needs for uniqueness and belongingness. Such an ontological shift reframes recruitment as a relational and human-centred experience through which individuals may begin to feel acknowledged and connected. From this perspective, recruitment goes beyond its instrumental dimension to become the first enactment of organizational inclusivity. The overarching philosophy

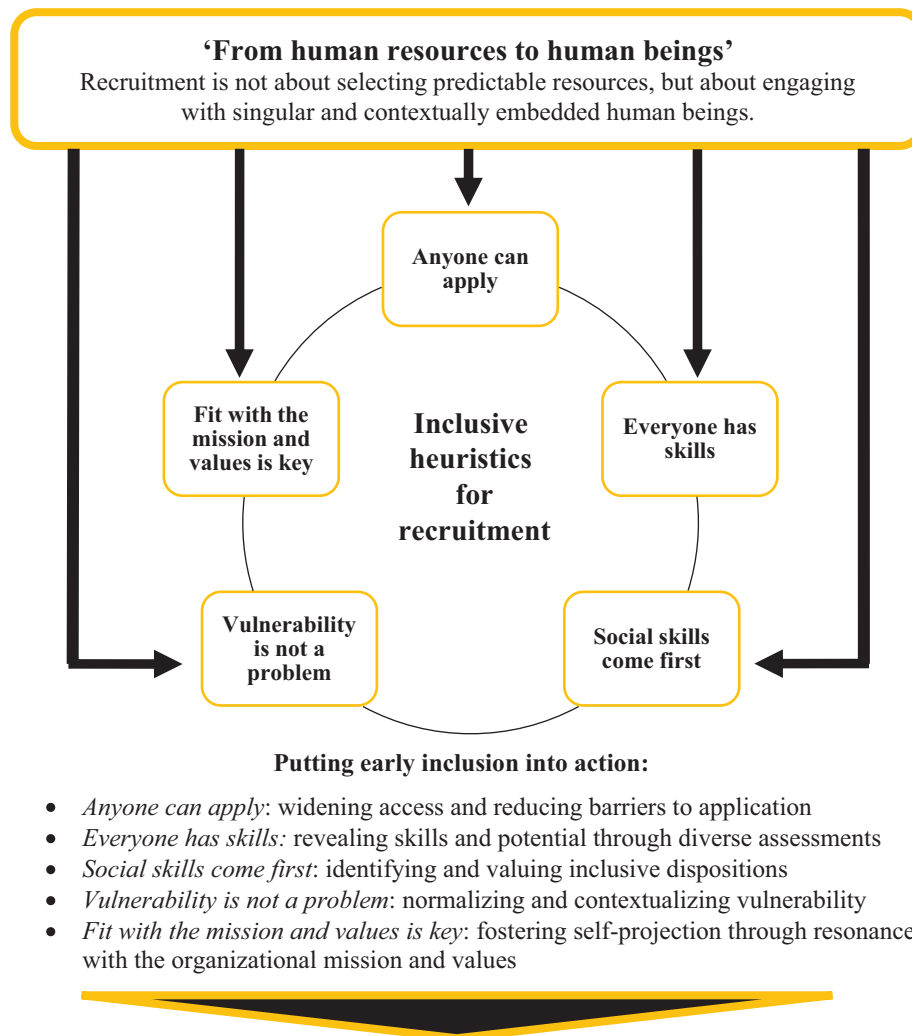


Figure 4. From vision to action: a framework to support inclusive recruitment
Source: Own elaboration.

('from human resources to human beings') lays the foundation for an inclusive approach to recruitment, while the five principles discussed above may serve as inclusive heuristics that operationalize this vision. As illustrated in Figure 4, they may be understood as a generative compass for inclusive recruitment, particularly suited to contexts characterized by temporary, project-based, or volunteer-based forms of organizing.

Conclusion

This paper proposes to move beyond the corrective view of inclusive recruitment to consider it as a potential experience of inclusion. Building on this conceptual shift, our study contributes to inclusion research by emphasizing the ontological change it entails: ceasing to view individuals as resources and instead genuinely recognizing them as unique beings to be engaged with. Recruitment is therefore reframed as a process through which organizations can foster an early sense of inclusion. We thus contribute to advancing more dynamic and integrative understandings of inclusion (Özbilgin, 2009). For practitioners, the five principles derived from our analysis may serve as inclusive heuristics to rethink their approach to recruitment. However, inclusion cannot be sustained by recruitment alone. It is a continuous and dynamic process (Hofbauer & Podsiadlowski, 2014), shaped by reflexivity and learning at both individual and collective levels within organizations. Sustaining inclusion, therefore, requires continuous attention and commitment throughout the employment relationship and daily organizational life. Future research could examine how other organizational processes and practices contribute to, or hinder, inclusion. It could also investigate the temporal dynamics of inclusion, not only in terms of how it emerges, but also how it evolves over time, both in temporary organizing contexts and in more established organizational settings. More broadly, future research could explore inclusion as a systemic challenge that extends beyond organizational boundaries, requiring the coordination of multiple actors across contexts (Barlatier et al., 2025).

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Appendix I. Composition of the crew in 2018

| Gender | Age | Nationality | Home country | Profession or situation | Disability | Nautical level at the time of the selection | Number of seasons in the crew |
|--------|-----|-------------|--------------|-----------------------------|------------|---|-------------------------------|
| F | 25 | French | France | Student | Yes | Beginner | 1 |
| M | 37 | French | France | Engineer | No | Low | 4 |
| F | 34 | French | France | HR manager | No | Beginner | 1 |
| M | 60 | French | France | Consultant in management | No | Very good | 1 |
| F | 22 | French | France | Student | No | Beginner | 1 |
| M | 29 | French | France | PhD student | No | Good | 1 |
| F | 40 | French | France | Project manager | No | Low | 3 |
| F | 36 | French | France | Engineer | No | Beginner | 1 |
| F | 58 | French | France | Art conservator | No | Beginner | 2 |
| F | 27 | British | France | Speech therapist | No | Professional | 2 |
| M | 29 | French | France | Former military dog trainer | Yes | Intermediate | 1 |
| M | 20 | French | France | Student | No | Low | 2 |
| M | 59 | French | France | IT manager | No | Beginner | 1 |
| F | 24 | Canadian | Canada | Student | No | Intermediate | 1 |
| M | 35 | French | France | Team Jolokia skipper | No | Professional | 2 |
| F | 39 | German | Germany | Sailing instructor | No | Very good | 5 |
| M | 20 | French | France | Student | No | Good | 1 |
| M | 42 | Polish | Poland | Factory manager | No | Good | 1 |
| F | 41 | Italian | Spain | Researcher in biology | No | Good | 1 |
| M | 29 | French | France | Caseworker | No | Intermediate | 2 |
| M | 39 | French | France | PR manager | No | Low | 4 |
| F | 41 | Romanian | Romania | Lawyer | No | Good | 1 |
| F | 31 | German | France | Architect | Yes | Intermediate | 1 |

Source: Own elaboration.

Appendix 2. Challenging stereotypes in offshore racing: Team Jolokia's recruitment vignettes

Vignettes used in recruitment campaigns to challenge stereotypes about offshore racing and encourage a broader range of applicants.



- 1) To apply to Team Jolokia, you must speak French—FALSE!
- 2) To join Team Jolokia, get your chequebook ready—FALSE!
- 3) To make it into Team Jolokia's crew, it's better to be a guy—FALSE!
- 4) To get on board Team Jolokia, you need sea legs—FALSE!
- 5) To sail with Team Jolokia, it helps to be ripped—FALSE!
- 6) To fit in at Team Jolokia, better to be young and cool :)—FALSE!
- 7) To be part of Team Jolokia, you just need to be yourself—TRUE!
- 8) When you join Team Jolokia, you need to be open to others—TRUE!
- 9) To adapt to Team Jolokia, you need to step out of your comfort zone—TRUE!

Source: Secondary data; our translation.

Appendix 3. Manifestations of inclusive principles throughout Team Jolokia's recruitment process

| Inclusive principle | Phases | | | |
|--|---|---|---|--|
| | Sourcing | Application* | Assessment | Selection |
| Anyone can apply | Open call without predefined roles; universal eligibility emphasized (regardless of age, income, nationality, disability, etc.); communication material (vignettes, trailers, etc.) aimed at demystifying ocean racing and countering self-exclusion; financial aid available to reduce economic barriers | Accessible language and open-ended questions; alternative submission formats (phone/video); explicit openness to beginners (no prior sailing experience required) | | |
| Vulnerability is not a problem | | Explicit invitation to share any anticipated obstacles or challenges to commitment | Interviews led by French Navy psychologists and recruiters as spaces conducive to self-disclosure and open dialogue; individualized attention to candidates' discomfort during physical and nautical assessments | French Navy psychologists and the physical trainer as safeguards to identify vulnerabilities that might be incompatible with life on board and team safety and cohesion, or the candidates' own health |
| Everyone has skills | | Recognition of candidates' diverse personal experiences (volunteering, sport, etc.) as relevant and valuable sources of skills beyond sailing | Diversity of assessment formats and contexts offering multiple opportunities to demonstrate skills and reveal hidden potential | Debriefing to review the skills of each candidate; presence of an inclusive watchdog to maintain deliberation based on predefined criteria. |
| Social skills come first | | Past or current involvement in collective settings as indicators of candidates' ability to engage and interact with others | Dedicated teamwork criterion in the assessment grid; cross-assessment of candidates' team engagement and group positioning, collaborative mindset and inclusiveness across various settings: structured interviews with recruiters exploring candidates' experiences of collective life; combined use of the Big Five personality traits assessment and a group decision-making exercise, followed by individual debrief interviews with the French Navy psychologists; pair-based practical nautical exercises | French Navy psychologists' insights into candidates' potential inclusiveness, drawn from their interpretation of behavioural and discursive elements, inform and support the final selection process |
| Fit with the mission and values is key | Prominent emphasis on Team Jolokia's diversity-driven mission, acting as a magnet that fosters personal identification and a desire to belong; prestigious boat reimagined as a laboratory for diversity within organizations and society; messaging centred on engagement and self-transcendence, attracting candidates drawn to physical challenge and deeply human, relational experiences | Questions on candidates' motivations and envisioned contribution to the mission of Team Jolokia | Dedicated criterion for personal resonance with Team Jolokia's project; cross-assessment of candidates' motivations through interviews with recruiters and French Navy psychologists, which provide space for candidates to connect their personal background with the mission | French Navy psychologists' insights into candidates' motivations and potential alignment with Team Jolokia's mission, drawn from their interpretation of discursive elements, inform and support the final selection process |

Source: Own elaboration.

Note: *All elements in this column refer to the content of Team Jolokia's application form.