

Question

What companies use blind/anonymous resumes and what benefits have they reported?

Introduction

Anonymous or blind processes for reviewing applicant resumes is a strategy that firms are increasingly exploring as a solution to reduce bias within selection processes. Though this approach does not completely eliminate bias in hiring. Evaluating resumes anonymously can play an important role in reducing the possibility for bias in candidate selection and aid firms in recruiting diverse talent.

Potential for Bias in Resume Screening

Academic research highlights that the process of screening resumes can inject bias into the hiring process. One of the seminal studies on this topic looked at the effect that **African American sounding names**, e.g. Jamal and Lakisha, had on call back rates, finding that individuals with these names **had 50% lower call back rates for interviews** as compared to names typically associated with Caucasian individuals, e.g. Emily and Greg.¹ The study showed individuals with Caucasian sounding names were called back at a higher rate, even when the quality of a given resume was taken into account. These findings hold true beyond the binary of African American and Caucasian, illustrated by a 2014 report from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development which found that **in all 17 countries analyzed, having a foreign name meant that individuals had a more difficult employment search**, highlighting the international nature of this problem.²

The findings are similar when resumes reveal information about gender as opposed to race or ethnicity. A 2014 study focusing on scientists found that when evaluating resumes of a **male and identically qualified female** candidate, **the evaluators rated the male applicant as more competent and employable**.³ In addition, the participants in the study “selected a higher starting salary and offered more career mentoring to the male applicant”.⁴

Anonymous Resumes as a Solution to Bias

The body of research highlighted above illustrates that **resumes can reveal identifying information that may introduce bias into candidate selection processes**, especially at the initial stages. One proposal that has emerged for dealing with this type of bias in the employment process is the use of blind or anonymous resumes. These processes involve reviewing the resumes of potential employees without their names or identifying information. Through this approach, employers can reduce the incidence of bias in the initial screening process. This bias can be related to characteristics such as gender or racial/ethnic background.

Impact of Implementing Anonymous Resumes.

Research conducted in European countries, including Sweden, France, and Germany, **suggests that anonymous approaches to reviewing resumes, do tend to lead to more equal outcomes** among groups within the initial phase of candidate selection.⁵ This type of selection process also impacted applicants in that “41% of ... applicants self-evaluate their chances to receive an interview invitation as higher with anonymous job applications and about 33% rate their chances to be equal”.⁶

Some firms implementing this approach are also moving to require **anonymous work samples** from applicants. This aligns with a body of literature that finds that work samples are highly predictive of job performance.⁷ In the United States, firms within the technology sector have been some of the most aggressive in implementing these types of recruitment processes. This is likely because of a clear relationship between the tasks sampled and job duties.

Major firms in the United Kingdom, including HSBC, Deloitte, Virgin Money, and KPMG have implemented programs to recruit staff without taking their names into account.⁸ **Deloitte's UK talent head stated "the bias is actually unconscious, so we really need to go further back in the process to the sifting phase".**⁹ Some of the firms in this UK initiative have taken this a step further by masking the names of the schools that candidates have attended, in order to remove any bias that information may inject into the process. Given that these initiatives have been implemented recently, the exact results of these changes are not yet known. However, based on some of the research highlighted above, it seems likely that these steps will reduce bias in the initial selection process. The results of these large scale efforts in the United Kingdom will hopefully provide useful data on the full implications of anonymous resumes, as compared to the smaller scale implementation efforts thus far.

Case Study: Compose, a software company recently acquired by IBM, has implemented blind screening of candidates.¹⁰ An important component of this process is having prospective employees submit work samples that mirror the types of tasks that they would undertake as employees. **The firm found that the process did increase the diversity of their hiring and lead them to take on talent that might have been overlooked in standard application processes.**

Potential Drawback of Anonymous Resumes

- Selection processes involving blind resumes may not address core issues of diversity and inclusion within an organization.¹¹
 - However, **research from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development suggests that much of the potential discrimination that candidates experience occurs at the initial stages of the application review process and the discrimination in later stages is significantly lower.**¹² Though blind resumes will not eliminate the incidence of bias or discrimination within a firm, these processes can be an important step.
- Recruitment systems involving anonymous resumes may not be ideal in cases when there are structural differences between minority and non-minority groups, for example disparate educational attainment.¹³
 - These processes limit a firm's ability to identify and recruit individuals who may be particularly underrepresented in a given profession, for example in STEM careers.
 - Evidence also suggests that anonymous resumes may prevent employers from properly contextualizing negative information on the resumes of some minority candidates, for example periods of unemployment.¹⁴
- Implementing these systems properly can be an intensive process for both candidates and organizations.
 - **Depending on the complexity of the processes implemented, some candidates may decide not to apply to certain companies, for example if required to produce work samples.**
 - Firms will also need to invest in the training and technology required to ensure that these process are implemented effectively and consistently.
 - In addition, fully understanding the effects of implementing these systems will depend on the initial conditions in an organization, i.e. orientation towards "discrimination, affirmative action, (or) equal opportunity".¹⁵

Conclusion

Both governments and companies are increasingly experimenting with anonymous resumes. When implemented the expectation is that these types of review processes reduce the incidence of bias at the initial application stage. The initial evidence broadly shows that anonymous resumes can play a role in improving the diversity of candidates selected to interview. The current experimentation with anonymous resumes in a range of areas will contribute greatly to a fuller understanding of the effects and implications of anonymous candidate selection processes.

Works Cited

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