

Demographics

White People Do Good Things for One Another, and That's Bad for Hiring

by Nancy DiTomaso

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At some point in your career, you were probably turned down for a job at a new organization in favor of an “internal” candidate. Most of us have had that experience. It’s even more likely (though you probably weren’t aware of it) that you’ve been rejected at times in favor of outside applicants who were known quantities to the hiring managers—candidates who were referred by other employees or recommended by friends of friends. That’s how the world works.

In fact, if you look back on your own checkered past, and if you’re honest with yourself, you’ll recall that a lot of the jobs you did get came through personal connections of some kind—associates, mentors, friends, family. You’re savvy about organizations, and savvy job-seekers rarely go in cold.

But what if you’re not a former associate of anyone in any employer that might need your skills? What if you’re not a mentee, a friend of a friend, a relative? What if you don’t come recommended by a trusted source—if you don’t have an “in” of any kind and are not a known quantity?

Then you're out of luck, and that's exactly why today's corporate executives are missing the point about diversity: Whites don't have to do bad things to minority groups in order to maintain a racial advantage in employment and wealth. They only have to do good things for one another. And they do good things for one another all the time.

In a study I conducted among white workers, I found that 70% of the participants' jobs, past and present, had been landed with the help of friends or relatives who were in a position to provide inside information, exert influence on the candidates' behalf, or directly offer job or promotion opportunities.

Yet virtually all of these employees, as well as white managers I've interviewed, maintain that they oppose racism and are in favor of equal opportunity.

In my work on diversity, I often meet CEOs who are genuinely concerned about disparities and are highly motivated to increase their organizations' diversity. Yet they frame the issue in terms of discrimination and "bias against." They don't see the powerful locked-arms effect of the "bias for" that's prevalent in hiring and promotion decisions. I once spoke to an executive whose company was being celebrated for its commitment to diversity, but over dinner I was told proudly by one of the key HR managers that the company relies on referrals from existing employees for many of their middle-management hires.

Which brings me to take an unpopular stand: Up with bureaucracy.

I don't mean the kind of bureaucracy that drives people crazy. I mean the kind that provides minority candidates with protections from biases that are embedded in corporate decision-making. It's perfectly logical for managers to want to interview and hire known quantities—résumés can be opaque and mendacious, and there's no Angie's List equivalent for finding highly recommended employees (at least not yet). But when it comes to hiring and promotion, I'm in favor of a

systems approach that reduces reliance on the kinds of judgments that lead to bad decisions—an approach that is measured not on process but on outcomes with regard to the competency, race, ethnicity, and gender of hired or promoted employees.

I'll be the first to acknowledge that a systems approach can feel inadequate; the “numbers” never tell a complete story. Neither companies nor universities rely solely on test scores, because they know that doing so wouldn't lead to the best outcomes. So the trick is creating a systems approach that evaluates candidates in a holistic way. That means an array of metrics, from competency tests to psychological profiles regarding fit for the job. Companies need to establish specific criteria on what constitutes competence in any given job, and they need to collect data on those specific criteria rather than rely on assumptions or impressions. To be effective, metrics need to be specified in advance, and they need to be up to date and not based solely on managerial perceptions.

Part of the solution is a new mind-set on executives' part. There's abundant evidence that just trying harder or wanting to do better doesn't make a difference. What does matter is being conscious of the decisions we are making—we need to move these crucial decisions from the unconscious to the conscious realm. If we think about being accountable for the decisions we make, and if we stop believing that we can make truly unbiased or objective decisions, then we are less likely to make decisions that reflect implicit or unconscious bias in favor of people like ourselves—and more likely to end up with a workforce that is more diverse and better fits the needs of our organizations and their global clients.

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