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Hiring

Research: Hiring Managers Are Biased Against People with Longer Commutes

by David Phillips

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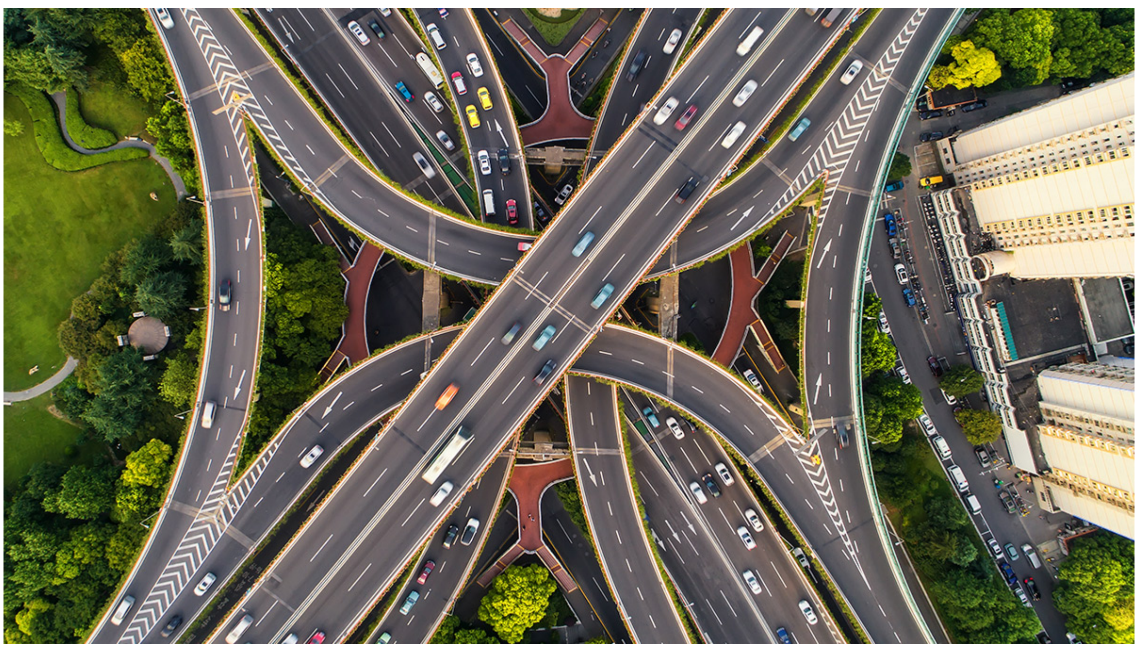

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Summary. Thanks to the résumé, the first things employers learn about job applicants are their names and where they live. Résumés attach a place to a person, and addresses indirectly tell employers something about the applicant's neighbors, commute, income level, and... **more**

Thanks to the résumé, the first things employers learn about job applicants are their names and where they live. Résumés attach a place to a person, and addresses indirectly tell employers something about the applicant's neighbors, commute, income level, and preferences for neighborhood amenities. This bit of information may influence who employers pick. Can this perception of place perpetuate bias and inequity?

In a forthcoming study, I tested how employers respond to similar applicants who report different residential addresses. I was particularly interested in whether perceptions of place can perpetuate poverty and inequality. So my team of research assistants and I identified a collection of low-wage jobs in Washington, D.C. during the summer of 2014. We sent 2260 résumés from fictional people to these jobs. The applicants varied in their proximity to the job's location and their neighborhood's level of affluence. Roughly 4 in 5 applicants received no response, a handful were rejected, and about 1 in 5 received a positive response, such as an invitation to interview.

My results show that applicants living in *distant* neighborhoods received positive responses from employers less frequently than those living near the workplace. In fact, applicants who lived 5-6 miles farther from the job received about one-third fewer callbacks. The size of this penalty is similar to the penalty for signaling race with a black-indicating name. (For background: Other prominent studies compare employer responses to fictional applicants with names that signal different ethnicities. They provide some of the clearest evidence of significant discrimination in employment and rental housing. Comparing racial discrimination to a penalty for long commutes is complicated for many reasons, not the least of which is that race and place are related in DC. But the comparison at least provides a benchmark. In my study, an extra six miles of commuting lowers an applicant's chances by as much as listing a black-indicating name like Jamal or Lakisha.)

In some ways, avoiding applicants with long commutes makes a lot of sense from the employer's point of view. Low-wage jobs tend to have high turnover and absence rates, which could be exacerbated when the employee has a long ride to work. Recently on a radio show discussing my research, a former suburban hiring manager called in to echo this sentiment: "We had a difficult time finding applicants for our low-level clerical positions because those applicants lived in the city. … We found that we were not able to keep those employees very long because of the long commute. … So, as we were recruiting for employees, we definitely took into account where they lived." Transportation probably matters most for these for these entry-level employees who are less able to buy stable transportation than their high-wage counterparts.

Of course, real job applicants from distant and nearby neighborhoods differ by more than just their commutes. In D.C., neighborhoods farther from jobs tend to be poorer neighborhoods, and applicants who apply to jobs from those neighborhoods face obstacles due to race, class, and so on. I wanted to understand whether employers care about an address because of proximity or these other factors. It turns out that employers care more about commute distance. When I presented employers with two applicants from neighborhoods with similar levels of affluence but different commute distances, they still preferred the nearby applicant. I also edited all aspects of the fictional person's name, work history, education, etc., so people from different neighborhoods appeared similar on average. Other factors equal, proximity matters.

And yet even if bias does not drive the commute penalty, picking employees according to distance *can* drive social inequity. In D.C., census data shows that a black person lives, on average, one mile farther from low-wage jobs than a white person. In many cities, urban revitalization has also led to increased rents, gentrification, and movement of low-income, minority groups away from jobs. So, when a low-wage employer avoids an employee due to their commute, that penalty disproportionately affects groups facing other disadvantages. A person could move to a distant, low-rent neighborhood because they face a temporary economic difficulty and then become trapped by their address. Explicit bias does not need to be present to reinforce inequity.

So how might employers resolve an apparent tension between a reliable workforce and reinforcing racial inequality and neighborhood poverty? The first step is to simply be aware of the equity implications of apparently neutral practices. A company that considers attributes of a candidate’s home location can cause inequity even if not intentionally redlining entire communities. Likewise, frequently changing work schedules may disrupt precarious travel arrangements for otherwise productive workers.

Second, improving the extent, quality, and affordability of employees’ transportation can help. Community-wide public transit programs, like recent low-income fare programs, are likely beyond the scope of private businesses. However, some high-wage employers actively work to manage their employees’ transportation. Several tech companies provide dedicated bus service to their Silicon Valley headquarters. These companies clearly believe that the benefits of these services for employee productivity and retention outweigh the significant cost of running a bus system. Are there similar programs that could be developed for lower-wage workers as well? Given the right circumstances, providing employee transportation could help the employer while creating social benefits.

Finally, for a broader range of employers, partnerships with local government or social service providers could meet joint goals of profitability and public good. Some of this is happening already. Local governments and employers in less densely populated places, including in my own city in Indiana, are working together to supplement their low-wage workers’ unpredictable transportation arrangements with ride-sharing services. Other employers have hired social service organizations to provide on-site services that help employees navigate instability in their lives, including with transportation, that would otherwise drive turnover. While more research is needed to ensure these options are cost-effective, creative partnerships can help navigate an employer’s tension between hiring employees who can reliably arrive at work and reinforcing social inequity.

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