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THE WORK ISSUE

Is Blind Hiring the Best Hiring?

Most companies say they want to attract a diverse workforce, but few deliver. The only solution may be a radical one: anonymity.

By Claire Cain Miller

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A few years ago, Kedar Iyer, an entrepreneur in Silicon Valley, became acutely aware of a problem in his industry: A surfeit of talented coders were routinely overlooked by employers because they lacked elite pedigrees. Hiring managers, he thought, were too often swayed by the name of a fancy college on a résumé. To try to address the problem, he created a software company called GapJumpers, working with employers to create challenges for applicants that mimicked what people would do on the job. Companies using GapJumpers wouldn't see candidates' résumés, just their names, photographs and test results. In theory, this process would shift employers' focus from résumés to skills. Then, two years ago, he came across an idea that caused him to rethink his business.

In the 1970s, symphony orchestras were still made up almost exclusively of white men — directors claimed they were the only ones qualified. Around that time, many began to use a new method of hiring musicians: blind auditions. Musicians auditioned behind screens so the judges couldn't see what they looked like, and walked on carpeted floors so the judges couldn't determine if they were women or men — the women often wore heels. The Boston Symphony Orchestra pioneered the practice in 1952, and more orchestras began using it after a high-profile racial discrimination case was brought by two black musicians against the New York Philharmonic in 1969. Researchers from Harvard and Princeton took notice and studied the results; they found that blind auditions increased the likelihood that a woman would be hired by between 25 and 46 percent. In fact, with blind auditions, women became slightly more likely to be hired than men. Confident that they would be treated fairly, female musicians started applying in greater numbers.

GapJumpers was already working from the insight that, like musicians, coders created something that could easily be evaluated by their peers. But Iyer realized from the study that employers didn't need to see prospective employees' faces, or even learn their names.

Eventually, they would have to meet, but by keeping the process blind for as long as possible, Iyer figured he could help reduce bias. And, besides, he was already working with the best tool for masking identity in the history of humankind: software.

For anyone, finding a job in Silicon Valley can be a mysterious and befuddling process. Google used to routinely conduct 25 interviews over the course of six months before settling on a candidate. They also asked all applicants, no matter their age, for their SAT scores. And the questions they posed to interviewees were strange enough to warrant pop-culture parody. In ''The Internship,'' Vince Vaughn and Owen Wilson's characters are asked during a Google interview: ''You're shrunken down to the size of nickels and dropped to the bottom of a blender. What do you do?''

Google likes to hire people who possess something it calls Googleyness, an amorphous measure of how well they will fit in. It's not easily defined, but it includes things like enjoying fun and — appropriately — coping well with ambiguity. This emphasis on ''culture fit'' isn't unique to Google; it seems to have spread across industries as work hours have lengthened and eaten into our leisure time, and as offices, especially in the valley, have further blurred the distinction between work and leisure. What a candidate might be like in a conference room at 10 a.m. has become almost as important as what he'd be like playing Ping-Pong after a few beers from the office kegerator.

It should come as no surprise that hiring for culture fit can be self-reinforcing. In 2014, Google for the first time released data on the makeup of its employees, revealing the sort of work force its recruitment strategy yields. Only 2 percent of its employees were black, and 3 percent were Latino. Seventy percent were men. And, as at most tech companies, Asian-Americans made up a disproportionately large share of employees. Google has claimed, like many companies across all industries, that the problem is not entirely of its own making, but far upstream: There simply aren't enough qualified women and minority candidates applying.

There is some truth to this. The ''pipeline'' of qualified applicants is not representative of society as a whole — in many fields, there are disproportionately more white and Asian people graduating with elite degrees. But that still does not account for the sizable gap between the number of minority students graduating with the qualifications to work in highly skilled jobs and the number who are hired. Nearly 9 percent of graduates from the top 25 undergraduate computer science programs come from underrepresented minorities (black, Latino and Native American), according to Education Department data analyzed by Maya A. Beasley, associate professor of sociology at the University of Connecticut. But those groups make up less than 5 percent of the work forces at Google and other prominent tech

companies. Underrepresented minorities account for 16 percent of law-school graduates, Beasley found; but, according to the National Association for Law Placement, they make up just 8 percent of newly hired associates and 4 percent of partners.

‘‘The pipeline argument can be wiped out with basic statistics,’’ Beasley says. ‘‘The number of people graduating from top schools is just enormous, so you have to think, What could these companies do wrong to not get them?’’

One answer is that companies rely too much on flawed human judgment when they recruit. Despite the digitization of job listings, human-resources departments have not changed much from the analog days. And, according to decades of research on the topic, humans just aren’t that good at hiring. A study of top banking, law and consulting firms found that similarities in things like leisure activities and personality were the most important factor in their evaluation of candidates. Hiring now resembles choosing a romantic partner more than an employee, says Lauren Rivera, an associate professor of management and sociology at Northwestern and the author of the study.

This tendency can be particularly pernicious when it comes to race, as a landmark 2003 study showed. Researchers from the University of Chicago and M.I.T. created phony résumés with the same qualifications, giving half of them black-sounding names (Lakisha Washington and Jamal Jones) and the other half white-sounding names (Emily Walsh and Greg Baker). Those with ‘‘white’’ names received 50 percent more callbacks for interviews than those with ‘‘black’’ names. A 2015 study followed up on this, and found that candidates with black-sounding names from elite universities did only as well as those with white-sounding names from less-selective schools. Other recent studies have found that applicants who are Muslims, ex-offenders, mothers, disabled or gay are also less likely to be called back, even if the employers swear they want a diverse work force and believe they’re doing everything in their power to create one.

To try to combat these biases, Iyer and his co-founder Petar Vujosevic devised a way to screen job applicants without showing employers any biographical information. GapJumpers and its client create a list of skills required for the job, then design a relevant

test that the applicant completes online. The first piece of information the hiring company sees is applicants' scores, and, based on those, it selects candidates to interview. Only then does it see their names and résumés.

GapJumpers has conducted more than 1,400 auditions for companies like Bloomberg and Dolby Laboratories. According to the company's numbers, using conventional résumé screening, about a fifth of applicants who were not white, male, able-bodied people from elite schools made it to a first-round interview. Using blind auditions, 60 percent did. ''Employers say, 'If you can show me your skills in this role, I am willing to interview you, regardless of where you come from, what you look like or who you are,' '' Iyer says. A new study from Harvard Business School backs up this line of reasoning. It found that when service-sector employers used a job test, they hired workers who tended to stay at the job longer — indicating that they were a better match. When employers overruled the test results to hire someone for more subjective reasons, the employees were significantly more likely to quit or be fired.

GapJumpers is just one of a handful of Silicon Valley start-ups peddling technological fixes for hiring practices. Gild, for example, has proprietary software that finds candidates based on code they have published online and strips out biographical information before recommending them to employers. Textio, a start-up with clients that include Starbucks and Microsoft, scans job listings and highlights language that data have shown to turn off certain candidates. For example, saying a job requires a ''rock star'' will draw more men than women; saying it requires a ''passion for learning'' attracts more women than men. Textio's research has found that while most people dislike corporate jargon — ''synergy,'' ''push the envelope'' and so on — applicants who are not white dislike it even more and are less likely to respond to job listings that use that sort of language.

At Google, interviewers now use standardized questions, mostly abandoning the brainteasers, according to Laszlo Bock, its head of people operations — the Google term for H.R. They stopped asking for SAT scores, a practice that research has shown underestimates the college performance of women and minority students. They have tried to build diversity into the definition of ''Googleyness,'' like whether someone has taken an interesting life path or solves problems in a different way. Google says it is hiring more black and Latino employees these days, but this increase has yet to affect its diversity numbers.

Silicon Valley is in many ways an odd place to be at the forefront of the solution to the problem of corporate homogeneity. Its work force is strikingly uniform: The diversity numbers from Facebook, Twitter, Microsoft, Yahoo and other companies look no better than

Google's. But it's also one of the few industries in which even the biggest companies are young and nimble enough to quickly change the way they do business, and one that desperately needs more qualified workers.

Workplace practices that start in Silicon Valley often spread to other industries — like open office arrangements, and yoga classes. Despite its reputation today, the tech industry could one day become a model for other industries. If so, the American workplace could soon look less like the people who are doing the hiring and more like the people graduating with the skills to join it.