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How an ethnic-sounding name may affect the job hunt

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Hiring managers tend to bypass résumés with foreign-sounding names, no matter what the level of education and experience, new research finds

You may have a string of prestigious degrees and years of experience in Canada, but potential employers may never get that far into your résumé if your name sounds foreign, a new study has found.

An underlying reason appears to be subconscious discrimination, the researchers suggest.

"What we think is happening is recruiters have to go through piles of résumés very quickly. If they see an unfamiliar name, they may get an initial first reaction that they have concerns about whether the person has the social and language skills the job requires," said Philip Oreopoulos, assistant professor of economics at the University of Toronto and co-author of the study.

Even if the résumé clearly addresses such concerns of hiring managers, "sometimes they can't shake that first reaction," he said. "And that can be the difference in deciding not to contact that very qualified person for an interview."

It's an underlying reason for a common complaint from immigrants to Canada that they never hear back from prospective employers, even when they are applying for jobs that precisely match their expertise. In fact, the results suggest that a foreign-sounding name alone can put even Canadian-raised and educated job applicants out of the running for a job, Dr. Oreopoulos said.

The study (titled "Why do some employers prefer to interview Matthew, but not Samir?") found that English-speaking employers in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver - who should have an awareness of the diversity of talent in the work force, given their city's multicultural populations - are about 40 per cent more likely to choose to interview a job applicant with an English-sounding name than someone with an ethnic name, even if both candidates have identical education, skills and work histories.

The researchers sent out more than 7,000 hypothetical résumés to hiring managers at companies in the three cities that had advertised jobs requiring that applicants have a bachelor's degree and fluency in English. The positions covered a number of professional fields.

For 25 per cent of the résumés, the fictitious applicants were given English-sounding names such as Carrie Martin and Greg Johnson, with relevant Canadian undergraduate degrees and Canadian experience at three previous jobs.

The researchers found that those applications were 35 per cent to 40 per cent more likely to be contacted by employers than the second 25 per cent of the résumés which were identical, except that the supposed applicants had

Chinese-, Indian- or Greek-sounding names.

An additional quarter of the résumés had Chinese- or Indian-sounding names, equivalent international degrees and the same level of Canadian experience. Their call back rate was a further 10 per cent lower.

The final group of résumés had Chinese- or Indian-sounding names, international education and foreign experience - and drew few responses from potential employers. The results were similar in all three cities in the study.

The researchers then went on to try to find out why hiring managers might be biased against applications from candidates with ethnic-sounding names.

The managers were contacted and asked about why ethnic-sounding names might be a reason to not follow up on a qualified candidate's application. Dr. Oreopoulos said it was very difficult to get recruiters to talk about their own potential discrimination, so the researchers asked participants to suggest reasons why other hiring managers might be more likely to choose people with English-sounding names for interviews.

Even though the researchers pointed out to the recruiters that all the applicants had relevant education and experience and ability in English, "the respondents tended to jump to the conclusion that those with the ethnic names were immigrants," Dr. Oreopoulos said. Many respondents implied that would raise questions about whether the person had the social and communications skills to be successful in the job, he said.

It's a dilemma with no easy solutions for job applicants, Dr. Oreopoulos said. "You could change your name, but your name is a significant part of your identity. I definitely wouldn't recommend changing your name to get a higher chance of getting a job," he said.

He suggested one tactic might be for a job seeker to put his or her name in a smaller type size or in a less visible location on the résumé, while playing up language skills and other necessary experience..

Another approach would be to take advantage of the trend toward video résumés, which can make it clear that you have the language and presentation skills to do the job, he added.

As for employers, he suggested that one way to reduce potential bias among hiring managers would be to specifically ask for résumés that mask the applicant's name, similar to what is done for orchestra rehearsals in which the musicians play for the vetting committee behind a screen.

For example, in a job application the name and contact information could be on a separate sheet at the back of the résumé rather than on the cover page, he suggested.

Ultimately, "I think the onus is much more on employers to be aware of their potential bias and look beyond names, so they take advantage of the quality and experience of the best candidates," Dr. Oreopoulos said.

"If our theory is correct, it's in the employers interest. If it is subconscious, then employers are missing out on good candidates."

The research was published as a working paper for the federally financed diversity research agency Metropolis British Columbia. It was co-authored by University of Toronto doctoral candidate Diane Dechief and edited by a team from the faculties of Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia.

HR MANAGERS' RESPONSES

The researchers found that human resource managers were reluctant to talk about their own potential discrimination, so instead they were asked to suggest why others might give short shrift to a résumé from a job applicant with a foreign-sounding name. Among the replies from 33 hiring managers:

"Foreign sounding names may be overlooked due to a perception that their English language skills may be insufficient on the job."

"When you're calling someone with an English-sounding name, you know what you're getting into. You know you can call Bob Smith and can talk to him as quickly as you want to ..."

"I personally am guilty of gravitating toward Anglo names on résumés, and I believe that it's a very human condition - [a

result of] resistance to change."

"... It's difficult to imagine hiring someone with a long first name, as it might be impractical in terms of answering the phone and saying it. People with easy-to-use shorter names are easier to hire and work with."

"I'm down to about seven seconds to vet a résumé ... I do realize how unfair the whole process is."

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