

THE  
RECRUITMENT  
ISSUE

# Interview Kit

hide your  
identity!



## Is this the secret to the perfect hire?

*Blind recruitment – disguising names and other key information – was supposed to be a huge leap forward for inclusion. But not everyone is convinced it delivers*



It started in the unlikely surroundings of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1952. Concerned about its predominantly male composition, musicians were asked to audition behind a screen, to ensure they were being judged purely on their performance rather than their gender.

Today, Boston has been joined by a number of major orchestras in employing blind recruitment methods in the name of diversity. But the idea has spread far beyond the rehearsal room: Idecco research suggests 35 per cent of UK businesses are using some form of blind recruitment practice,

whether that is removing names and ages from CVs or more broadly anonymising applications so hiring managers are not waylaid by any form of demographic information, including education or extracurricular interests, and even having third parties conduct interviews in order to ensure objectivity.

Among its adherents is London-based PR agency Dynamo, an early adopter in a notoriously nepotistic industry. Candidates apply directly through its website and answer questions which assess experience and interest in the role. Only a phone number is taken – with name, gender, age and education omitted. At interview stage, team members have copies of candidates' answers but no other details are given until they meet them in person.

Socrates Pylotis, senior account executive, was one of the first Dynamo employees to be hired using the new methods. "Knowing that I was invited for interview based on my suitability for the job is exactly what I wanted," he says. "Beyond skills and experience and a few hobbies and interests, there's not much a CV can tell you about a person until you meet them anyway."

Professional services firm EY has been on board since 2015, when it removed academic and work experience criteria from its recruitment process for entry level hires. According to student attraction manager Andri Stephanou, names and backgrounds have "zero bearing on the outcome".

Candidates are video interviewed anonymously by an outsourced provider and then undergo process screening, based solely on eligibility. Shortlisted candidates attend assessment events and are matched with assessors who know nothing more about them than their names. "At every point in the process,

candidates progress based solely on merit rather than background. The primary driver is to support both hiring for diversity and social mobility," says Stephanou.

As prime minister, David Cameron was an enthusiastic advocate of blind recruitment and committed to introducing

it into civil service graduate hiring processes. And for classical musicians, and many others, it certainly appears to be working: back in the 1950s, studies from Harvard and Princeton found Boston's practices increased the likelihood of women being hired by 25 to 46 per cent (albeit only once they had removed their shoes so assessors were not alerted to the sound of heels on floors).

But what's notable today is just how divisive the practice has become since its widespread adoption, and how little evidence there is of its efficacy.

Experts are certainly conflicted. "Blind hiring does not work in recruitment as it does in the orchestra," says Jozsef Blasko, HR director at Coca-Cola Eastern Europe. "How the musician approaches

a piece of music and how they perform it summarises their entire experience in terms of style, sensitivity and knowledge. That is not possible in application forms and CVs.

"Blind recruitment is a very stupid way of trying to eliminate bias. The whole point of recruitment is to take everything into account, so using blind recruitment as an equal opportunities approach defeats the very purpose of hiring."

For Blasko, blind recruitment can entrench existing problems. He gives the example of a generic straight, white, male candidate who has built up an impressive CV. If his success is partly due to unconscious bias on behalf of recruiters and managers, Blasko argues, blind hiring will only continue the practice because his experience will be the only thing he can be hired for.

Certainly, a contemporary Harvard study of a large-scale blind recruitment drive in the Australian civil service gives pause for thought. It found that ascribing a female name to a previously name-blind CV actually made it 2.9 per cent more likely they would make it through to interview; the opportunity was reduced by 3.2 per cent when the name was male.

The Harvard study was unable to reach conclusions about why the initiative backfired. But concerns about the negative impact of blind recruitment extend beyond gender. Social mobility could be affected too, says Blasko: ▶

**"As an approach to equal opportunities blind recruitment defeats the very purpose of hiring"**

**Michelle Obama came from humble beginnings to graduate from Harvard. Would blind recruitment have obscured her impressive journey from an employer?**





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"Education is an achievement and it's a big part of who you are. And it's not always an indication of class. Take a female Chinese student at Harvard. She may have got there because she worked hard and pushed herself. She may have been the first in her family to have gone to university. Why would you want to eliminate that effort and achievement?"

"It always horrifies me when companies use blind recruitment," adds Sam Hamrebtan, in-house recruiter at Hotwire Global PR. "Removing education from the application process can also exacerbate the issue. If you have two CVs, one from an underprivileged background who wants to get into communications and they've got a degree to get themselves to that stage, and one from a candidate with a more fortunate upbringing who could afford to complete three unpaid internships, that person will always come off better."

Others, while acknowledging blind recruitment's limitations, believe it is the best tool we have to combat multiple unconscious biases which can be triggered by even innocuous personal details. Raafi Alidina, consultant at inclusion and diversity consultancy Frost Included, studied the topic as a research fellow at Harvard Kennedy School. He cites a major 2003 study by the US National Bureau of Economic Research – *Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal?* – which found individuals with "white-sounding" names were 50 per cent more likely to reach interview stage.

"Just a name can do it," says Alidina. "And what we're discovering now is that any subtle indicator can cause bias. Someone from the east end of London or someone who attended Howard University in the States, which is 99 per cent black, can create unconscious bias in the recruiter."

Advocates of blind recruitment point out it isn't necessarily about hiring someone from a marginalised group. It doesn't eliminate individual bias, or guarantee a more diverse workforce, but



More women than ever play in the world's top orchestras, thanks in part to blind recruitment

it does ensure you are getting the best person for the role, which should lead to greater diversity.

That's why, ironically, the current chief operating officer at Frost Included is a white, heterosexual man, says Alidina. There were 437 applications when the role was advertised, of which 94 per cent were male. Where all identifying factors were removed under blind recruitment, 70 per cent of the resulting candidates were female. The final five interviewees were three women and two men, and three of them were non-white. "If the best person for the role ends up being from a non-diverse demographic group, that's

OK, as long as the hiring process has been entirely objective," says Alidina.

Ideally, he adds, an objective and fair recruitment process needs to start with how the vacancy is advertised. Only accepting an online application will also alienate certain demographics. And

if it's only on LinkedIn, you could be missing out too.

"Companies tend to ask, 'how can we help this marginalised or underrepresented group come to our company?' when they should be asking 'how can we adapt? How can we change our processes to make it easier?'"

The real issue here may be whether blind recruitment is being used as part

of a suite of initiatives to recruit diverse candidates rather than being a standalone reaction to a specific problem. Because while it may bring diverse candidates to the table, it can't ensure they will be hired, or made welcome when they are.

"There's so much more to candidates than just the bare bones, yet that's what is left with blind recruitment methods," says Hamrebtan. "We should be getting to a point where we are understanding unconscious bias rather than just sanitising how we recruit."

"We're effectively going backwards by taking every detail off job applications. It's like saying 'we're not capable of being open or celebrating difference, so we're going to remove the temptation to discriminate based on demographic.'"

This is a valid argument. But many alternatives to blind recruitment are expensive or impractical. AI-assisted technology is approaching the point where it can intuitively and sensitively control for specific demographic issues, but it is far from mainstream. Blasko prefers the idea of 'reverse recruitment', where skills and thinking styles are tested by problem-solving exercises before CVs are considered. In a strange way, it brings us full circle to the principles that were first played out in the rehearsal rooms in Boston more than 60 years ago. **PM**

\* The CIPD Talent Acquisition Conference in London on 13-14 February covers recruitment, early careers and apprenticeships, with speakers from Barclays, Rolls-Royce, Royal Mencap Society and more. Find out more or book tickets at [cipd.co.uk/talent-acquisition](http://cipd.co.uk/talent-acquisition)

**"We now know that any subtle indicator can cause bias – just a name alone can be enough"**