



‘DON’T TELL US ABOUT YOURSELF’

‘Blind recruitment’, which aims to increase diversity, has been a feature of the music world for decades. Now businesses are starting to catch up

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Blind recruitment began with the orchestra – the Boston Symphony Orchestra, to be precise. In 1952, the predominantly male orchestra introduced blind auditions to bring more women into the fold. Musicians performed behind a screen to ensure assessments were based entirely on performance.

The new approach seemed to work – research by Harvard found that blind auditions increased the likelihood of female musicians being hired by 30%. But the practice didn’t become common in classical music circles until the 1970s. The business world has been even slower on the uptake – it’s only in recent years that blind recruitment has started to take off.

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

'Blind recruitment' is the process of removing any information that might trigger unconscious bias in the recruiter – names, education history and gender, say.

WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT IT?

Recruiters may focus more on candidates' merits and experience, rather than their backgrounds.

WHAT'S BAD ABOUT IT?

Blind recruitment doesn't eliminate the effects of historical bias, so it's best to pair it with other initiatives.

Blind Four

Deloitte became one of the first Big Four accountancy firms to introduce a form of blind recruitment when, to improve social mobility, it removed education information from applications in 2015. According to its own research, Deloitte hired 111 candidates who otherwise would have been overlooked in 2016-17.

EY has implemented a similar recruitment drive, removing academic thresholds and the need for work experience. "The process ensures that the candidate reaches each stage based on merit rather than their background," explains Andri Stephanou, EY's student attraction senior manager. "The primary driver was to support hiring for both diversity and social mobility."

EY candidates are video-interviewed anonymously by outsourced providers, before undergoing a screening process to check their eligibility for the role. Shortlisted candidates are then invited to interviews with matched assessors, who are provided with just their names.

This work is driven by damning statistics about diversity and accessibility within the profession. In 2017 headhunting firm Green Park found that only one of the UK's top 20 accountancy firms was led by a CEO from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background, while just 15% were led by

women (down to 10% now). And, according to recruiter Hays' *Diversity & Inclusion Report* for 2018, just 34% of accountancy and finance professionals believe their leaders are effective role models for diversity and inclusion.

"It's recognised that some of the more established professions, including accountancy, tend to draw from a very narrow social background," says Andrew Willis, head of legal and advisory at HR firm Croner. "This isn't the case for all firms, but the perception is that there is definitely a diversity issue."

Raafi Alidina, a consultant at diversity consultancy Frost Included, explains that everyone experiences bias, but that this shouldn't be an excuse for inaction. "Blind recruitment is the first step in removing the opportunity for bias," he says. "We're not trying to fix the person – unconscious bias is deeply ingrained – but we can change the environment so the opportunity for bias is greatly reduced."

Willis agrees that blind recruitment gives businesses the best chance of hiring the strongest candidate. "You are focusing entirely on the candidate's experience and suitability for the role," he says.

Blind recruitment can also help firms from a legal point of view, he notes: "Some organisations don't always appreciate the risk the recruitment process presents if a prospective candidate feels

they've been discriminated against. Organisations need to make sure that a particular candidate wasn't unsuccessful on discriminatory, unlawful grounds. So any effort that companies make to reduce the risk of unconscious bias is extremely helpful, particularly in the event of tribunals."

Problems to look out for

But critics of blind recruitment say it can actually perpetuate discrimination. The blind CV of a straight white male with lots of work experience will arguably come across better than that of a black female who has less work experience because of historic discrimination. And the process of stripping candidate information down to its bare bones can take the character out of job applications – which is at odds with current advice to 'stand out from the crowd'.

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Alidina insists that blind recruitment is not a comprehensive solution: it's most effective as part of a wider initiative. Lee Owen, a director at Hays Accounting and Finance, agrees. Blind recruitment, he says, should be used alongside unconscious-bias training, competency-based applications, transparent pay reporting and long-term initiatives to attract and retain more diverse talent.

"Of course, blind recruitment can only go so far, as you would ultimately see a candidate face-to-face anyway," says Willis. "Employers still need to be alive to the risk of unconscious bias at a later stage. Blind recruitment is an important first stage, but training needs to play a role too."