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STRATEGIES, C3

What's Inside

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DISCRIMINATION

Didn't get the job? Could it be your name?

It's a difficult and little-discussed issue for many people on the hunt for work: What if the one essential on every résumé and a symbol of your identity is hurting your prospects of landing a position? JEFF ROBERTS reports

A funny thing happened to Rajiv Prasad when he invented an alter ego named Roger Pritchard — prospective employers responded to his job applications.

It was the mid-1990s, and, despite having a university degree and work experience in the high-tech sector, Mr. Prasad was having trouble finding a job in a slumping Ottawa economy. So he decided to try an unusual experiment.

Curious about whether his Indian name was hindering his employment prospects, Mr. Prasad responded to five job postings with two versions of his résumé. The only difference between them was the name at the top: One listed Mr. Prasad's real name and the other listed a "white alias" named Roger Pritchard.

'Society is punishing people for the name given to them. There is an implicit bias against names that is based on overall stereotypes.'

The result: Roger Pritchard received a response from three of the five companies; Rajiv Prasad received none.

Mr. Prasad's experiment illustrates a difficult and little-discussed issue for many job seekers in Canada. What if your name — the one essential item on every résumé and a symbol of your identity — is hurting your prospects of landing a job?

It turns out that your name may matter more than you think. Although there has been no major research on the topic in Canada, studies from other countries suggest that a person's name can directly affect their chances of getting hired.

In 2004, American Economic Review published a study called "Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal" in which two academics sent out résumés in response to help-wanted ads posted in the New York and Boston areas.

They reported that résumés with so-called "white names" received 50 per cent more calls for interviews than those with "African-American names" — even though each set of résumés showed equivalent qualifications.

In New Zealand, a study published this year in the University of Auckland Business Review reported on a simulation in which managers and business students were asked to create a short list of preferred employees from a pool of fictitious résumés.

The short lists that emerged reflected a marked preference for candidates with European names over those with Chinese or Indian ones. This held true even when the résumés of the "ethnic" applicants reflected New Zealand education and work experience.

Such findings reflect a societal judgment against ethnic names, says Monique Morris, director of the Berkeley Calif.-based Center for Discrimination Research, a non-profit think tank dedicated to civil rights research and advocacy.

"Society is punishing people for the name given to them. There is an implicit bias against names that is based on overall stereotypes," she says.

In 2004, Ms. Morris's centre conducted its own research that showed temporary employment agencies in California were less likely to respond to an otherwise qualified job applicant if the person's résumé listed a recognizably Arabic name.

The research found, for instance, that a résumé listing the name of Heidi McKenzie received a response rate of 36.7 per cent whereas the name Samira Al-Amin received a response of 28.4 per cent. In other words, a woman named Heidi had a 23 per cent better chance of getting an interview than one named Samira.

"There's no doubt about it, that having a name that suggests a Muslim or Arabic affiliation will get a lower response," Ms. Morris says.

Diversity has become such a hot-button sensitivity issue these days that many large corporations have put in place a raft of policies and programs to reduce the possibilities of such discrimination entering into their hiring processes.

Royal Bank of Canada, for instance, uses a computerized filtering tool on the résumés it receives to view competencies without seeing an applicant's name, says Norma Tombari, RBC's senior manager of diversity and workforce solutions.

That's not the only way it tries to guards against bias. "Our professional recruiters are well-versed and sensitized to the issues, having received diversity and employment equity training from external and internal consultants," she says.

This includes guidance on intercultural communication, tips for bias-free interviewing and information about overcoming barriers to hiring and integration of visible minorities.

'The front level of recruiting is where it really falls down. When you go to entry-level or administrative recruiting, that's where it has to change.'

Still, the safeguards in place at larger companies are often not used at smaller ones, adds Arupa Tesolin, a human resources specialist and director of Mississauga-based training firm Intuita Consulting.

She says that résumé screening typically occurs at smaller companies that do not have the resources to ensure that job interviewers are instructed in diversity issues.

"The front level of recruiting is where it really falls down. When you go to entry-level or administrative recruiting, that's where it has to change," she says.

See NAME on page C6

ANTHONY JENKINS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

What's in a name

The following names identified with distinct ethnic groups were among 20 names that were part of a sample of about 6,000 résumés sent to temporary employment agencies in California in a study conducted in 2004.

Highest response rate:	
Name	Response Rate
Heidi McKenzie	36.7%
Jose Gonzalez	35.9
Christina Rodriguez	35.7
Ebony Hill	34.8
Katherine Hoffman	34.2
Rosa Lopez	33.4
Lowest response rate:	
Samira Al-Amin	28.4
Joyce Hsu	28.1
LaKeisha Johnson	27.5
Miguel Reyes	26.4
Mohammed Ahmed	24.5
Abdul-Aziz Mansour	23.0

Source: Discrimination Research Center, Berkeley, Calif.

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What's in a name for a job?

NAME *from page C1*

And even companies that are proactive about diversity may unwittingly introduce discrimination into their hiring practices when they outsource recruiting to firms that do not take care to prevent résumé screening she adds.

To prevent that from happening, she says companies should have a clear idea of who is doing their hiring, and take steps to ensure that those people are also trained to choose applicants on the basis of talent, not ethnicity.

Is there anything individual job seekers can do to ensure their name is not harming their job search?

Ms. Tesolin has worked closely with skilled immigrants who have told her they were more successful in getting callbacks after changing their names.

She suggests that shortening a first name to one syllable can be effective for "marketing purposes."

Ms. Tombari says that while job applicants are entitled to abbreviate a name or use initials, she believes that being honest and authentic is always the best approach for getting a job.

Job seekers who believe they've been denied an interview because of their name may be able to take legal action, says Prof. Jeffrey Reitz, an expert in ethnicity and immigration at the University of Toronto.

However, Prof. Reitz says that, while résumé screening is illegal, it is hard to prove and hard to challenge.

"The only legal avenue is the human rights commission, but that's difficult because it takes a long time and it's a big investment of energy, meaning that those who have a case are often not in a position to pursue it."

An ethnic name may even be an attribute when it comes to finding work at international firms, where managers used to a cosmopolitan workplace place a premium on talent.

Shortening a first name to one syllable can be effective for 'marketing purposes.'

Sujin Chan, who was raised in Malaysia and attended the London School of Economics, claims that her name has never held her back in a career that has included stints at PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP and the big London-based law firm Clifford Chance. Ms. Chan, who now lives in Ottawa and is working toward obtaining credentials to practice law in Ontario, argues that companies no longer have the luxury of discrimination if they want to compete for the best talent.

She, for one, has never thought of changing her name in the hopes of getting a job. "I like my name and I'm going to stick with it."

And Mr. Prasad (a.k.a. Roger Pritchard)? He eventually went to work with a major high-tech company, where he says his name and visible ethnicity was never an issue with his boss or co-workers.

Mr. Prasad, now working for another tech company, believes that, although having an ethnic name still matters, it is less of a barrier to employment than it used to be.

"I think it's always in play, whether you realize it or not," he says. "I think it's still a concern even in this era where we are supposedly much more 'diversity-positive'.

"But I also like to believe that employers are much more enlightened about a name's actual relevance — or irrelevance — for hiring purposes these days."

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