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Removing Prejudice from Online Job Applications

An honors thesis presented to the
School of Business
University at Albany, State University of New York
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
graduation from The Honors College.

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Research Advisor: Dr. Raymond K. Van Ness

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Abstract

Currently, there are no laws limiting an employer from viewing a candidate's social media presence. The United States Equal Opportunity Employment Commission prohibits discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion, national origin, age, disability, political affiliation, sexual orientation, and genetic information. If a candidate is active on professional social media websites such as the largest online professional network, LinkedIn, some of this information can easily be gathered by an employer. To stop discrimination in the hiring process, recommendations for a blind hiring process will be provided. This process will ensure that a candidate is initially judged solely based on the merits of their application before the first face-to-face interview. It will be implemented in a manner similar to the double-blind review process used in academic publishing. The steps behind this restructured hiring process have been created by analyzing LinkedIn's job posting functions for recruiters. This new hiring process is necessary since there is no standardized method of how recruiters interpret a candidate's social media presence.

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INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

LinkedIn boasts that, “a hire is made every 10 seconds using LinkedIn” (LinkedIn, 2018). But is it the right hire? Currently there are no laws that prevent an employer from viewing a candidate’s social media presence. The United States Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (EEOC) enforces, “federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of the person's race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, gender identity, and sexual orientation), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information” (EEOC, 2018). If a candidate is active on social media, some of this demographic information can easily be inferred by an employer.

Professional social media websites such as LinkedIn have bridged the gap between being an online professional network and a social media website. LinkedIn’s mission statement is to, “connect the world’s professionals to make them more productive and successful” (LinkedIn, 2018). LinkedIn currently has more than 590 million members across 200 countries (LinkedIn, 2018). Recruiters can use LinkedIn’s, “Jobs” section to post a job listing. Recruiters can then view applicants and recommended users through LinkedIn’s recruiter specific tools. When viewing candidates who have applied to a role, a recruiter first sees a candidate’s profile picture, name, industry, location, job history, and education.

A new user can use Facebook to sign up or they can submit their email address, first and last name, location, most recent job title, most recent company, educational status, and industry. If a new user is a student, they must submit their college start and end date. When a user signs up for LinkedIn, they don’t have to provide a profile picture. However, a user’s profile looks incomplete without one. Yet, it is also a negative to upload a picture because factors such as a user’s race, ethnicity, gender, and age can be inferred regardless of accuracy.

Through analysis of LinkedIn's job hiring features, a recommendation will be provided for a blind hiring process that strives to eliminate racial and ethnic bias. Guidance in establishing this new process will be drawn from the double-blind process used in academic paper review, with considerations for tailoring it for the internet. The new job hiring process will be structured by reviewing current literature and examining the laws surrounding the current job hiring process. The new hiring process will focus on a candidate's experience and aims to establish a new precedence that initially protects certain demographic information.

Highlights of Modern Racial "*Self-Discrimination*"

Some job applicants who believe that employers judge them based on the ethnicity that their full name indicates, may utilize the process of resume whitening to avoid potential discrimination. Resume whitening is an applicant's decision to remove cues from a resume that indicate a non-white race. An example of this would be using a nick-name or a name that is more, "American" sounding instead of their full legal name on a resume. Such as if someone's legal first name is José, they might change it to Joe on their resume.

A field experiment was performed where resumes of the same caliber were submitted with either very White sounding names or very African American sounding names to Boston and Chicago recruiters. The credentials on the resumes were sometimes tailored to best fit the job description. This was done to make the imaginary candidate appear to be the ideal candidate. "The results show significant discrimination against African-American names: White names receive 50 percent more callbacks for interviews" (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). The publishing of this study may have encouraged further applicants to participate in resume whitening if they are applying to a job in the United States. Having to change one's given name in order to fit into

corporate culture is a form of cultural genocide. Applicants should not be required to change their identity in order to earn a living.

EEOC Laws Protecting Job Applicants

The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) enforces several laws that make it illegal to discriminate against a person in both the job hiring process and in the workplace. The main laws are shown below, in Table 1 (United States Government, 2018).

Table 1. EEOC Laws Enforced by the United States Government	
Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964	Illegal to discriminate against someone on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex
Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978	Illegal to discriminate against women because of pregnancy or childbirth
The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA)	Protects people who are 40 or older from discrimination because of age
Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)	Illegal to discriminate against a qualified person with a disability in the private sector and in state and local governments
Sections 501 and 505 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973	Illegal to discriminate against a qualified person with a disability in the federal government
The Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008 (GINA)	Illegal to discriminate against employees or applicants because of genetic information

Problems with the Current EEOC Laws

The current EEOC laws do not take into account the role that social media plays in the hiring process. Social media has become intertwined with the job search and applicant review process. LinkedIn is a social media employment website where users can share content, information, messages and ideas with other users via this platform. The term, “social media” refers to, “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)” (Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2018). A profile picture on a social media website such as LinkedIn, allows a recruiter to guess a candidate’s race,

ethnicity, sex, and age. The candidate's name may indicate what race they are, regardless of whether this information is interpreted accurately by the viewing party. Additionally, a candidate's social media presence or lack of social media presence can influence a recruiter's decision. The more platforms that a candidate is on, the more information that is available to recruiters. Some recruiters might be more inclined to choose a candidate that they can easily further research.

Companies are not required by law to provide a candidate with a notice that they were not hired. Following the same logic, companies are not required to provide a reason as to why they did not extend an interview or a job offer to a candidate. A job applicant often has no way of knowing if it is because of a quantitative trait or qualitative trait that prevented them from receiving an interview or a job offer. Quantitative traits can include a candidate's lack of experience or the position no longer being vacant. Qualitative traits can include a poor interview or possibly a company not hiring an applicant for a discriminatory reason.

There have been no new federal laws passed since 2008, that the EEOC is required to enforce (United States Government, 2018). A new law needs to be proposed that surrounds the role that social media plays in the job hiring process. Such a law could state that in every job application and posting, employers must state whether a candidate's social media is factored into the job hiring process. There is no way to prevent employers from researching a candidate online. Therefore, candidates should be notified if the employer might research a candidate beyond their application, resume, and references.

How Recruiters Subconsciously Hire and Social Media's Role in Hiring

“When used as an initial screening tool, resumes provide employers the opportunity to quickly review applicants' qualifications in areas such as education, work experience, and special skills” (Cole, Feild, & Giles, 2003). Digital resumes have more advanced features than paper

resumes. Digital resumes that are featured on a website such as LinkedIn can have clickable links to learn more about companies that the candidate has previously for and external links to a candidate's portfolio. "Research shows recruiters infer dispositional characteristics from job applicants' resumes and use these inferences in evaluating applicants' employability" (Cole, Feild, Giles, & Harris, 2009). When viewing a resume, a recruiter looks for certain characteristics that they deem to be an indication of job success. If they find these specific characteristics, then a recruiter will extend an interview or job offer to that respective candidate.

If a recruiter wishes to learn more about a candidate, they may research them through social media. The number of users on social media websites and applications increases daily, as does the number of recruiters who research candidates through social media. The specific percentage of recruiters who research candidates through social media varies by source. Popular social media websites such as Facebook, had, "1.49 billion daily active users" on average for September 2018 (Facebook, 2018). A recruiter may research a candidate further to see if they have any criminal history or maybe to see if they are posting inappropriate items on social media. "If applicants post un-professional (e.g., alcohol-oriented) information to their own Web sites, it seems plausible that recruiters will think of these applicants as not being conscientious" (Bohnert & Ross, 2010). There is a common stigma that posting photos of oneself drinking online is not professional. "Individuals who are seen as causing their own problems [e.g., drunkenness; obesity] are viewed as less desirable employees" (Bohnert & Ross, 2010). This could be applied to any potential bias such as a candidate being overweight. A study was conducted to see if employers would hire an overweight candidate. "The evaluators perceived the potential employee in a negative light, with her expected performance and desirability considerably degraded. This despite the fact that the respondents were not given any information as to how the potential employee would perform were she not

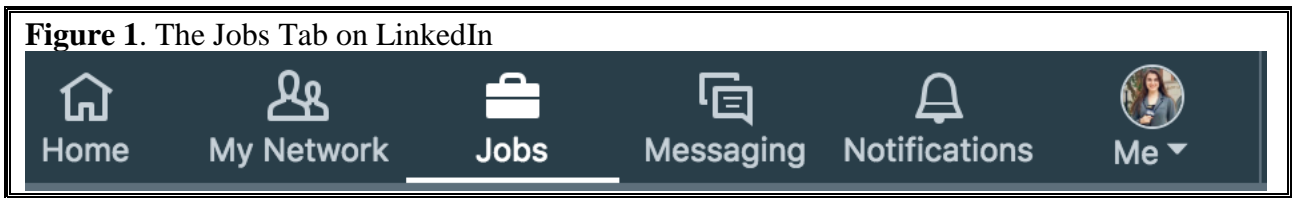
overweight” (Larwood, 1995). Photos posted on social media accounts in any context, whether it be an innocent headshot or a photo taken with alcohol present, help to fuel recruiter’s biases.

However, there is no standardization as to what is deemed, “inappropriate”. An anonymous survey that consisted of 448 young adult undergraduates showed that there are inconsistencies in how students believe a candidate’s social media should be interpreted in the hiring process. (Drouin, O’Connor, Schmidt, & Miller, 2015). The majority of results from this survey were similarly distributed between disagree, neutral, and agree in response to participant’s feelings and opinions about utilizing social media in hiring decisions.

Is not having a social media presence the key to successfully being hired? Unfortunately, it is a lose-lose situation. Having a lack of social media might stop recruiters from considering a candidate that they cannot easily research. “The level of publicly available data obtainable by employers is highly unstandardized across applicants, as some applicants will choose not to use SNSs at all while those choosing to use SNSs customize the degree to which information they share is made public to those outside of their network” (Brown & Vaughn, 2011). This makes using social media to access applicants an irrelevant measure of job success, since not all job applicants have social media accounts. For job applicant’s that do have social media accounts, “potential discrimination may result through employer’s access to publicly available pictures, videos, biographical information, or other shared information that often allows easy identification of [an] applicant” (Brown & Vaughn, 2011). If recruiters factor their judgment of a candidate’s social media presence into their interview and hiring decisions, then further research for standardizing this process needs to be completed.

How the LinkedIn Job Function Works for Candidates and Recruiters

For a non-premium LinkedIn account when a user logs into their LinkedIn profile they can select the jobs icon, shown in Figure 1, at the top of their screen to view jobs that LinkedIn thinks would be a good match for them based on a user’s qualifications and specified interests. Users can also search for jobs based on location, interests, and view connections that are employed by specific companies.



Candidates receive a notification message, shown in Figure 2, if a recruiter looks at their submitted job application. This message reads, “Congratulations – (company name) has viewed your application for (position title).” If a recruiter is interested in a candidate, they will usually message them through LinkedIn’s messaging service or via the e-mail the candidate provided.



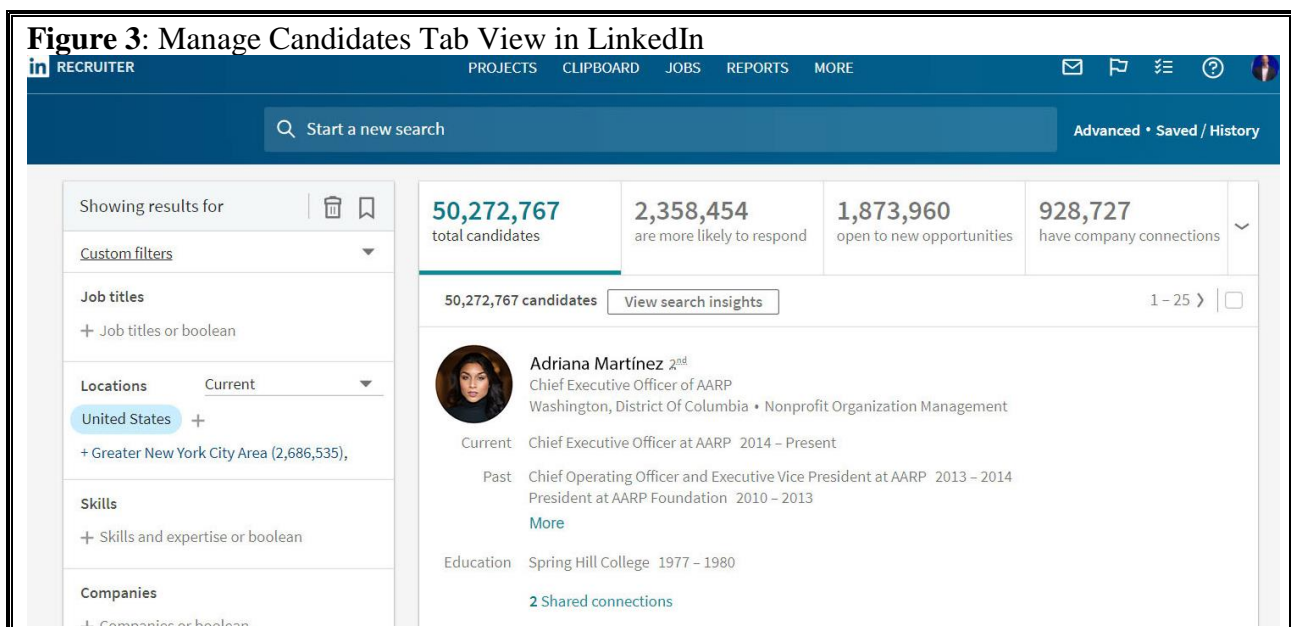
Recruiters can use the LinkedIn product, “LinkedIn Jobs.” LinkedIn Jobs is LinkedIn’s in-house job board. LinkedIn Jobs boasts that, “a hire is made every 10 seconds” (LinkedIn, 2018). LinkedIn Jobs promises recruiters the following objectives listed in Table 2 (LinkedIn, 2018).

Targeted Job Promotion	Targeted promotion to surface your job to candidates with the right skills, both in emails and across LinkedIn
Recommended Matches	Candidate recommendations that get smarter over time, providing personalized results

Candidate Management	A simple dashboard that tracks everyone from application to hire, all in one place
Only Pay for Results	Pay only when a candidate views your job post

After a recruiter posts a job they receive recommended matches, free InMail messaging to reach out to recommended matches, and a tool to manage job applicants found under the, “Manage Candidates” tab. Recruiters also have access to analytics regarding their job post. These analytics show job post views, the number of apply clicks and applies for the job, the budget spent on the job posting, and job post traffic details. These analytics can be reached by navigating to, “Show me stats.”

For an active job posting, recruiters see something similar to Figure 3 in the “Manage Candidates” tab (Huppert, 2018).



In the, “Manage Candidates” area, the dominant feature is the candidate’s profile picture. The profile picture is much larger than the text that lists the candidate’s name, current role, location, industry, current and previous roles, education, and if there are any shared connections. By having the profile picture here, LinkedIn is encouraging recruiters to take into account a candidate’s physical appearance when making a hiring decision.

Recruiters can also search for candidates by using search logic and by sorting through recommended matches. Recruiters who are familiar with Boolean logic, can use this technique to find candidates that meet a specific characteristic they deem important. Recruiters, “can run a Boolean search on LinkedIn by combining keywords with operators like AND, NOT, and OR during [their] search” (LinkedIn, 2018). These characteristics might encompass a recruiter trying to find a candidate who attended certain colleges to only finding candidates who are members of certain professional organizations.

Strategic Recommendations for a Blind Hiring Process

A new hiring process is needed that removes a candidate’s name and profile picture from their application during the initial hiring stage. This is to help ensure that a candidate is hired based off of their credentials and not their perceived race or personal appearance. For employment websites such as LinkedIn, a candidate’s profile picture and name will need to be removed from the, “Recommended Matches” section to remain consistent.

This blind hiring process is best applicable to companies who use online job posting websites such as LinkedIn, to find talent. A typical online hiring process consists of a job applicant applying to a job via an online posting. Then a recruiter selects certain applicants to participate in the second step of the hiring process. This second step varies. The second step in the hiring process could require the candidate to take a test, fill out a questionnaire, or complete an interview. For the purposes of this process once a candidate receives a notification that a recruiter is looking at their application, they will then be asked to complete an interview.

In order to implement this process, all online job boards will need to utilize software that replaces an applicant’s name with a randomized number. Under this process on LinkedIn, a recruiter would not see a candidate’s profile picture or name. They will only see a randomized

number at the top of their application. The recruiter will then reply to the user via LinkedIn's messaging app or through a coded email. The coded email system will be similar to the one that the website Craigslist uses. Craigslist uses a, "2-way email relay to help stop spam and scams" (Craigslist, 2018). This system disguises email addresses into a string of random letters and numbers when users wish to contact one another. At this point the candidate will be required to state their full name. Although it would be ideal for a candidate to not reveal their name until after they interview, there is a high chance of error in maintaining anonymity once a candidate has direct contact with a recruiter.

In the application itself, recruiters cannot ask a candidate to upload a resume. Only a candidate's, "online resume" that they filled out on the job site will be taken into consideration. If a candidate is required to upload a resume, this resume will most likely contain their personal information that the process strives to initially protect. Cover letters will not be utilized. A substitute for this is maybe requiring a candidate to submit a cover letter once a recruiter has indicated interest in their resume.

The blind hiring process needs to be mandatory across all online job posting websites and cannot be optional for users. If only one job website is implementing this new hiring structure, then some applicants may switch to a different website if they want to leave their name on their application. If this process is optional, then a bias would be created between users who choose to take their name off their resume and users who leave their name on their resume.

The basis of this process stems from the double-blind peer review process used by most academic journals. "Both the reviewer and author identities are concealed from the reviewers, and vice versa, throughout the review process" (Elsevier, 2018). When hiring candidates, the process

needs only to be single blind, since a candidate will find out their recruiter's name either before or during the interview.

Once a recruiter has a candidate's legal name they have the full legal right to research the candidate. However, it is best practice if a recruiter notifies the candidate that they are researching them beyond their application. This may include using a search engine or background check. All candidates who apply will receive a timely notification regarding the status of their application.

Limitations

Some companies specifically desire to hire minorities. In fact, some jobs and internships only accept minority applicants. In instances such as this the blind hiring process can still be utilized. The blind hiring process does not limit a company from asking traditional optional questions regarding a candidate's ethnicity and race. Most job applications include an optional diversity, disability, and veteran status survey towards the end of the application. A traditional diversity survey includes an optional ethnicity question regarding if a candidate identifies as Hispanic or Latino. This is accompanied by a race question asking a candidate to optionally identify themselves as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. An applicant's eligibility for diversity based roles will be determined by their answers to the diversity survey, which should be placed at the front of such applications.

This process assumes that a candidate accurately and truthfully states their experience and credentials. Resume padding is an ethical issue. To help combat this, companies need to present themselves as having a strong organizational culture that places an emphasis on ethics and to have realistic expectations for candidates. "Tensions between the expectations of two different roles (e.g., average applicant versus ideal candidate) may be resolved by lying when the individual

cannot reconcile the conflict by other means” (Roland E. Kidwell, 2004). For example, a recruiter should not expect a candidate to have at least three years of experience for an entry level position. This expectation might cause a candidate to lie about having this experience in their application.

The blind hiring process should be reserved for roles that are non-creative, non-appearance based, and that do not involve an element of art or performance. For example, a graphic designer’s portfolio is crucial to gaining a graphic design job. Therefore, a graphic designer needs to be allowed to share a portfolio with their name on it. If someone is a model, that industry is based on looks. Therefore, a model’s picture is necessary on their applications.

Certain items on one’s resume can possibly indicate race. For example, if a student attends a historically black college or is part of an organization such as the National Association of Black Accountants, these factors might be a strong indication of one’s race. It is illogical and would promote a loss of identity to remove one’s institution of higher education or professional organizations from their resume. Therefore, these attributes will not remain hidden. Similarly, a unique job experience may easily be paired to a candidate through the use of a search engine. This unique job experience should not be removed, even if it risks an applicant’s identity being revealed.

The proposed process does eliminate racial bias during a face-to-face interview. Additionally, this theory does not prevent discrimination once on the job. It is expected that most companies will have diversity initiatives in place to combat this.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Suggestions for Further Research

The blind hiring process seeks to revolutionize how organizations hire. An emphasis will be placed on a candidate’s credentials and not on their profile picture. This process can be applicable to helping curb a number of other related biases. These biases could pertain to personal appearance, age, religion, or disability status. This unbiased hiring process is necessary because it

is hard to prove that a candidate was not hired because of a discriminatory reason. Unless a recruiter specifically says on record that they did not hire someone because they identify as a certain ethnicity. Further research and the development of computer software for this process is the next step. To help recruiters differentiate between candidates in the absence of their name and profile picture, certain tools are needed across all employment websites. Tools such as being able to attach notes to a candidate's online application. The ability to tag certain phrases to a candidate's application that will help recruiters sort and narrow down their search. Such tags could be, "great data analytics skills" or "missing certification".

Research and standardization needs to be completed regarding how a candidate's social media accounts factor into the interview and hiring decision. A recruiter may find a candidate's Twitter account and view a tweet about a candidate's support for a presidential candidate. If this recruiter does not support that presidential candidate then they will most likely judge the applicant in a negative light because of this difference. A difference in opinion should not factor into a recruiter's decision-making process unless it indicates potential poor work performance. Diversity extends beyond race and includes a difference in opinions. If companies wish to promote diversity, then they need to have standardized and publicized guidelines in place about how to accurately judge a candidate's social media accounts.

To determine the impact of this new hiring process, several questions need to be examined. Are the same candidates still chosen when using the unbiased hiring process? Do ethnically diverse candidates feel that they were fairly hired because race did not initially play a factor into their application? Do these employees feel that they fit into their workplace culture? A study was conducted where university students who were actively searching for jobs or internships were interviewed about additional reasons for engaging in resume whitening. "Like Asian respondents,

the majority of black participants who described engaging in resume whitening emphasized that an important reason for doing so was to signal their ability to fit in with white employers and coworkers, and therefore to remove racial cues that might trigger negative stereotypes” (Kang, DeCelles, & Jun, 2016). Although a majority of these measures are subjective, so is race.

Race is a subjective social construct that stems from society and not biology. “Recent advances in the sequencing of the human genome and in an understanding of biological correlates of behavior have fueled racialized science, despite evidence that racial groups are not genetically discrete, reliably measured, or scientifically meaningful” (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Even though race is not scientifically meaningful, companies think it is important. “Realizing the importance of leveraging diversity to achieve a competitive advantage, companies have incorporated diversity training in their employee orientation and development programs in the United States” (McMahon, 2010). Companies hire firms or build in-house programs to promote and teach diversity. However, these initiatives fail to realize that the races that exist in the United States do not translate to other countries.

Since the job market is globalized, employers and employment websites need to be sensitive as to how race is perceived outside of the United States. Countries such as Brazil have extremely different racial categories, that are based around skin color and family origin. “Census categories developed by the IBGE (Brazilian census bureau) are: branco (white), pardo (brown), preto (black), amarelo (yellow) (Asians), and indigena (native)” (Ellis P. Monk, 2016). Even jobs that desire racially diverse candidates need to be more sensitive in trying to acquire these specific candidates. If a Brazilian is filling out an American diversity survey, then the typical American racial categories do not translate to the typical Brazilian racial categories. Therefore, in addition to implementing the blind hiring process, diversity surveys need to be restructured.

In the United States, race matters. If race did not matter, then policies such as affirmative action would not exist. Until Western society shifts their focus on cohesiveness instead of diversity, then a new, restructured hiring process is necessary. Companies that institute diversity initiatives, factor a candidate's race into the decision to hire them. The blind hiring process desires to see if by eliminating a focus on race during the hiring process, if companies will still end up hiring a diverse pool of candidates. The blind hiring process will hopefully be implemented in other areas in the future. Since science indicates that there is no real difference between people, it is hoped that a blind hiring approach will help make employment opportunities accessible to deserving candidates.

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