

Collective recruitment limits discrimination in hiring

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If the last decade was marked by the willingness of businesses to fight discrimination against women and ethnic minorities, both in hiring and promotions, it should be noted that good intentions haven't always been followed by results. In fact, far from it.

Among active women in France, only 6% occupy top managerial positions, the same proportion as... 1995. As for ethnic minorities, although the collection of statistics concerning them is not allowed by law, an examination of the French leading class is enough to note their poor representation.

To end discrimination, stereotypes must be eliminated. Yet, these die hard, as a recent study conducted by three researchers at Harvard University ("When Performance Trumps Gender Bias : Joint versus Separate Evaluation" working paper published on Social Science Research Network, www.ssrn.com) reveals.

Wanting to better understand hiring and promotion decisions, Iris Bohnet, Max Bazerman and Alexandra van Geen conducted a series of experiments, the results of which suggest a direction for effectively fighting discrimination.

NEUTRALIZING PREJUDICES

Among the 654 participants in their study, which included men and women, some took on the role of employers and others that of potential employees.

The latter completed a task that tested their aptitude in mathematics. Their performance levels were, afterwards, communicated to employers so that they may choose an employee who would perform this task once more, this time to the employer's benefit.

The results showed that employers had a negative bias against female candidates when their performances were presented individually and independently from other candidates.

Male candidates whose scores were slightly inferior to the average were selected, while female candidates whose scores were at the average were not. The stereotype according to which women would be less competent than men in mathematical tasks thus heavily skewed employer's decisions.

AVOIDING SELECTING CANDIDATES ONE AFTER THE OTHER

Interestingly, a simple manipulation allowed to do away with this bias: when the performances of female

candidates were presented not individually, but at the same time as those of their male counterparts, those with performance levels greater than the other candidates were selected.

To effectively fight against discrimination, businesses should thus avoid selecting candidates one after the other, and instead use a collective method. This approach is being used more and more in recruiting, but it is less widespread in promotion decisions.

This approach is, however, essential because it forces decision makers to rely on the comparative analysis of objective information, which neutralizes prejudices. It is time, for all private and public organizations, to recognize the importance, still today, of these prejudices and to act on them.

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