

# Are you hiring the wrong person?

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Have you ever applied for a job and wondered why it is offered to someone who appears to be less qualified than you? A new study by Berkeley-Haas Associate Professor Don Moore finds employment managers tend to ignore the context of past performance.

The article, "Attribution Errors in Performance Evaluation," (*PLOS ONE*, July 24, 2013), is co-authored by Samuel A. Swift, a Berkeley-Haas post-doctoral fellow; Zachariah S. Sharek, director of strategy and innovation at CivicScience; and Francesco Gino, associate professor at Harvard Business School.

"We would like to believe that the people who are making judgments that affect our lives—where we get hired or what school we are admitted to—have the wisdom to understand who we are, what we are capable of, what shortcomings aren't our fault," says Moore, "But our research shows people evaluating us have a great deal of trouble considering situational factors or context."

Study participants were asked to evaluate a situation similar to this hypothetical scenario:

John and Dave are applying for a senior [management position](#) at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). John works at the Oakland International Airport (OAK), and David works at San Francisco International (SFO). They offer comparable experience. One key measure of performance for the LAX job is the percentage of flights that leave on time at the applicant's airport. SFO is considered to be the

more difficult airport to land planes, in part because it has more overcast days and only two of four runways in use. Therefore SFO rates lower in on-time departures, and John from OAK gets the job.

In addition to studying hiring decisions by human resource managers, the researchers also studied graduate school admissions decisions and found similar results. For example, applicants with higher GPAs from schools known for easier grading systems beat out applicants with lower GPAs from universities with stricter grading policies.

"Our results suggested that alumni from institutions with lenient grading had a leg up in admission to grad school, and the reason for that is the admissions decision makers mistakenly attributed their high grades to high abilities," says Moore.

Moore describes this behavior as an example of the "correspondence bias"—a social psychology term that describes when people have the tendency to draw inferences about a person's disposition while ignoring the surrounding circumstances.

The study found that while the decision makers said they wanted to consider situational influences on performance, when given the opportunity, they failed to do so. The paper documents a systematic bias in the habit of thought.

Moore, however, remains hopeful that changing that behavior is possible on an individual and collective level.

"If you are a hiring manager, ask for more information about other people in the applicant's department and how the person you are considering is better or worse than others in the same situation," says Moore, "If you are an admissions director, ask for class rank." In addition, Moore says, applicants should offer more information about

their performance.

**More information:** [www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0069258](http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0069258)

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