

How companies can minimize the stigma of affirmative action

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(Phys.org) —Affirmative action policies in the workforce have increased diversity, often at the cost of stigmatizing the very workers the policies are designed to help.

New research finds that a deeper understanding of what triggers feelings such as resentment, stigmatization and "stereotype threat" can help companies prevent these negative reactions and make diversity efforts more successful, said the study's authors.

Management professors David Mayer of the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, Lisa Leslie of New York University's Stern School of Business and David Kravitz of George Mason University's School of Business built on previous studies that found that [affirmative action](#) recipients were viewed as less competent, which creates feelings of self-doubt for recipients.

The new research—based on a meta-analysis of 45 studies on the subject that includes 6,432 individuals—found additional drivers of the stigma affirmative action program recipients face. For example, they are also viewed as competitors for company resources, and therefore seen as less likeable by their colleagues, which can lead to negative assessments of their performance.

To counteract this effect, organizations should emphasize the qualifications of new hires, the researchers said, and allow the staff to know them as a person—their interests, hobbies, etc. Companies also

should reinforce the message that resources are not a zero-sum game, and that a stronger, more diverse team helps the whole organization succeed.

"People have all kinds of assumptions about what affirmative action means," U-M's Mayer said. "A lot of people assume it's about hiring people less qualified because they are a member of a protected group, even though that's illegal. Will it be a case where protected status is used as a tiebreaker? Or is it outreach and recruitment, which is a totally different animal that few object to? Be transparent."

NYU's Leslie said the findings advance our understanding of the complexities inherent in implementing affirmative action plans and diversity initiatives more broadly.

"Diversity initiatives are effective, but also produce unintended consequences that can limit the career success of the very groups of employees they are intended to benefit," she said. "Implementing an affirmative action plan without taking steps to avoid unintended consequence is unlikely to be an effective solution."

Those hired through affirmative action programs also need to be reminded that they were selected for their qualifications, and that others know of their qualifications. Leslie also suggested that highlighting the potential for diversity to benefit everyone may also help combat perceptions that affirmative action and other aspects of diversity initiatives work against the interests of whites and men.

"When a person is a member of a group targeted by an affirmative action plan, anyone who believes affirmative action involves preferences may not know why they were hired," said GMU's Kravitz. "Maybe they were hired because they're great. Or maybe the corporation wants to hit a target. To eliminate stigmatization, make sure everyone knows that the

affirmative action program does not involve preferences and highlight the competence and credentials of the new hires."

None of the drawbacks made the researchers conclude that companies should get rid of affirmative action programs. Instead, they conclude that such programs should be implemented more effectively and also that positive outcomes—such as having high-level minority role models in business organizations—should be studied.

The study, "The Stigma of Affirmative Action: A Stereotyping-Based Theory And Meta-Analytic Test of the Consequences for Performance," is scheduled for publication in the *Academy of Management Journal* this month.

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