Study examines how bias affects hiring practices

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Removing bias from the hiring process presents challenges for the hospitality industry and other service industries that want a qualified, diverse workforce. New research from Cornell University shows that hiring managers' awareness of competence among job applicants and managers' positive attitudes toward affirmative action programs help reduce prejudice in recruitment.

The study, "Do you look like me? How bias affects affirmative action in hiring," is available from the Cornell Center for Hospitality Research. It was written by Alex M. Susskind, an associate professor at School of Hotel Administration; Ozias A. Moore, an assistant professor of management at Lehigh University; and Beth Livingston, an assistant professor at the ILR School.

The report suggests that for organizations trying to improve the diversity profile of their workers, knowing the race of an applicant may help managers create a pool of desired applicants. But caution is required to prevent same-race bias or cross-race bias from becoming part of the hiring process. One approach to offset this effect is to recruit diverse candidates and add a blind evaluation component to the process to ensure that race is used to include, rather than exclude, qualified minority applicants, the researchers said.

The researchers conducted two experiments to investigate how race influences hiring practices using two different samples: one of business college students and one of hiring managers at a full-service national

hotel chain. In both samples, the evaluators (students in experiment one and HR managers in experiment two) were given scenarios that had a job position description and an applicant for that position. To introduce race into the evaluation process, a picture depicting a Caucasian or an African-American was attached to the applicant materials. The evaluators were asked to rate the suitability of the applicant in reference to the job description and whether they would hire the applicant they reviewed. In a follow up survey, the evaluators in both experiments completed a survey that assessed their attitudes toward affirmative-action programs.

The authors found that job candidates' fit for a position (manipulated through a resume with varying levels of qualification) and evaluators' positive personal attitudes toward affirmative action reduced same-race preferences. Evaluators' attitudes toward affirmative action most strongly affected suitability ratings for African-American evaluators rating African-American candidates, but only with the student sample did the evaluators' positive personal attitudes toward affirmative action also influence their decision to hire the candidate.

These findings highlight the importance of making all hiring managers aware of the potential for bias when race is included in the hiring process. Because same-race bias has negative consequences for those who are potentially hired and those who are passed over, a better understanding of the factors influencing hiring bias provides opportunities to counteract bias, the report states.

"In our multicultural workplaces, employers must ensure that hiring procedures are free from evaluator bias," the authors said.

While it is now common for employers to use social media sites to research the background and view the photos of job candidates during the hiring process, the report suggests that hiring managers should consider the potential bias associated with viewing job candidates'

photos and examine carefully the applicants' credentials during screening and hiring decisions.

This study also shows the importance of personal attitudes about affirmative action, demonstrating that managers' bias depends, in part, on individuals' views of affirmative action policies and practices. As a result, negative attitudes about affirmative action may reduce the positive effects of such programs and policies. Training programs should clearly define the organization's policies to ensure that a positive message regarding affirmative action is delivered.

"It may be difficult to change entrenched views of affirmative and diversity and inclusion programs, but managers and organization leaders should pay greater attention to their own attitudes (and those of their HR decision-makers) and reduce evaluator bias throughout the hiring process," the authors said.

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