The power of language: How rhetoric awareness can combat hiring bias and discrimination

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

I first realized the usefulness of literary theory to the issue of hiring discrimination when I came across an article about a permanent resident struggling to find employment in architecture, her field of expertise, in Canada.

Employment counselors from a government-funded newcomer program suggested the resident should shave foreign experience off her resume so she wouldn't appear overqualified to recruiters.

Despite policy and labor law changes, Canadian-specific work experience is still a barrier for many newcomers struggling to find employment in Canada. Beyond finding a job in the first place, there is also an increasing wage gap between Canadians and immigrants with the same level of education and work experience.

While many regard these issues as a matter of social policy, we are also dealing with a cultural, aesthetic problem. As a researcher in comparative literature, I believe literary theory can offer unique insight into the hiring process.

In particular, literary theory can help us understand how managers actually *read* resumes and why they prioritize certain types of experience over others. Understanding forms of unconscious bias can help us understand current hiring prejudices and, ideally, help us move past and overcome them.

Relying on rhetorical devices

The act of evaluating resumes is a reading exercise, and as such, it is bound to the conventions of literary genres. Literary theory can help us understand, for example, why hiring managers often succumb to a form of unconscious bias known as affinity bias by seeking out familiarity in resumes.

Two types of rhetorical devices—logos and mythos—are especially useful for understanding the resume reviewing process.

Mythos relies on external authority figures to provide knowledge, while

logos requires the reader to process the information by themselves. The act of name-dropping is an example of mythos, while academic jargon is an example of logos.

A headline reading "Canada's Trump" about a Conservative Party candidate (mythos) is much easier to grasp than an academic paper explaining how Conservative politicians have implemented "brand repositioning" strategies (logos) in a way similar to Donald Trump.

Mythos serves as a shortcut: what we already know helps us understand what we don't know. Evaluating a resume is meant to be an exercise in thinking about a candidate and yet resumes listing well-known companies—Apple, BMW, Colgate—are meant to be read quickly, without much thought.

Forbes recommends placing company names first in a resume, revealing that mythos, or familiarity, is valued by hiring managers.

Google's recent advertisement promoting its work certifications similarly show that immigrants need recognizable, familiar experience—not necessarily local.

Yet global disparities in technological resources mean not all companies can be verified as trustworthy names. In cases like this, what happens to resumes that don't have experience that can be pulled up online? The short answer is they may be deemed unverifiable or untrustworthy.

Hiring prejudice is nothing new

The barriers that certain groups of people—including women, people of color, queer and trans folks, and economically disadvantaged groups—face at work has historical precedents.

In the early 1840s, a [young Marx was reading French writer George Sand](), a rare female voice in the literary profession and an easy target of sexism.

Her 1841 socialist novel, "Le Compagnon du tour de France," parodied employers who rejected bohemian young men with fragmented work experience.

The novel told the story about a clash between traditional employers and their values, and a new class of nomadic young workers that [emerged during that decade's rural exodus]().

One employer, Mr. Huguenin, is only interested in hiring familiar young men. In one scene, [he asks a headhunter](): "You must have companions of the Tour of France, children of the Temple, sorcerers, libertines, the off-scourings of the highways?"

Like newcomers to Canada, Sand's nomadic workers faced prejudice because they lacked social history, not employment history. At a time when [technological progress]() had [not yet fostered a cohesive national identity in France](), prejudice against workers in the 1840s had to do with their unfamiliar origins within, not outside, France.

Do we share Mr. Huguenin's fears when we expect Canadian experience from newcomers? Could the same type of prejudice be threatening Canadians?

Trust is the solution

The fact that work experience must be recognized or certified is symptomatic of a larger crisis in trust—a crisis that has been [compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic](). We have not come a long way from Sand's time: her contemporaries may have sometimes believed

in "sorcerers, libertines, the off-scourings of the highways," but we still believe people can trick us.

By using literary theory to understand how rhetorical strategies like mythos and logos can shape the hiring process, we can gain insight into why some types of discrimination still persist—and how we can overcome them.

The solution to the trust crisis and hiring discrimination is slowing down and taking the time to truly understand an applicant's resume. Practically speaking, employers should use unfamiliar work experiences as an invitation to poke further and discover a new culture or perspective. It is only superficially that work experiences from other countries may be seen as nontransferable to Canada.

Recently, we have been boasting about how the Canadian dream is overtaking its American counterpart. But we should not imitate our neighbor to the south: the construction of any national myth is bound to be exclusionary.

Instead, what we need is a new myth, according to which all work experiences are relevant and valid experiences. No one should have to toil and labor for years before meriting trust. If employers considered resumes a few minutes longer and did their research thoroughly, we could genuinely break experience-related barriers into the workforce.

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