

# THE CONVERSATION

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Shadow boxing. Will levelling the playing field work? Orin Zebest, CC BY

## How to beat the hidden discrimination at the heart of the job hunt

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When you send off a CV to a prospective employer, you will hope to get a fair hearing. You will hope that your skills, experience and qualifications decide the response, rather than the school you went to, your post code, or even your name. Instinctively, though, we know that this isn't always the case. Prime Minister David Cameron already has zeroed in on the issue of how applications from people with non-Anglo-Saxon or Celtic names are treated:

*Do you know that in our country today: even if they have exactly the same qualifications, people with white-sounding names are nearly twice as likely to get call backs for jobs than people with ethnic-sounding names?*

The UK civil service, and many major employers, have agreed to introduce application forms without the applicant's name, in order to reduce the potential for discrimination. But how much does theory and evidence back this up?

### Starting off on the wrong foot

Certainly research in the US and various other countries suggests that your name can lead to far fewer calls to interview.

Although the UK does quite well in some international surveys in terms of anti-discrimination (5th out of 38 economically developed countries in the 2015 Migration Integration Policy Index), employment outcomes for some groups, and people's perceptions of discrimination, show that problems persist.



Red pen to CV details. Desi, CC BY

In recruitment, anonymous application procedures are those in which certain key pieces of information remain hidden during the application process. Removing names is just one example. An applicant's gender or age could also remain undisclosed.

Omitting such details can still leave room for guesswork, of course. Someone who lists 20 years of work experience won't be mistaken for a young person, and an employment gap on a CV might be assumed to be due to maternity leave (or perhaps a spell in prison). Nevertheless, it is a step in the right direction.

## **Blinkers on**

The difficulty lies with whoever reads the application, and that's what makes it so complicated. There are many potential forms of discrimination or biases in the hiring process, often based on our implicit biases or explicit views.

In the 1970s, for example, economics Nobel prize winner Gary Becker used the term "taste discrimination" to describe workers not wanting to work with colleagues of different nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and so on. His research suggested that firms which employ this kind of discrimination should lose out to less discriminatory companies with access to a more diverse pool of staff.



Making a point. afromztoa, CC BY-NC-ND

Statistical discrimination also plays its part. This is where employers allow their view of the average behaviour of a group to colour their decision-making – mothers with young children, perhaps, or older job seekers. If two applicants have identical skills and experience, then the call may well come down to this. Perhaps: “older people are usually more reliable than younger ones, so I’ll hire the older person”.

So, you can see how the anonymous applications idea comes about. Theoretically, they should be able to help overcome these kinds of discrimination against disadvantaged job seekers and assist them in getting through the initial application.

### **Getting into the interview room...**

Crucially, though, we have to examine whether anonymous applications actually work.

Evidence from various European countries such as Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands, as well as the US, suggests that name-blind anonymous application procedures can indeed improve the likelihood of certain groups of people being called back to the next stage of the recruitment process.

For example, in one Swedish study with name-blind applications, the likelihood of getting an interview rose for both women and those of non-Western origin. However, the number of actual job offers only rose for women, suggesting that ethnic discrimination was greater than gender discrimination if we assume that the actual experience and skills of all candidates was equivalent.

Experiments, with randomised controls, involving French firms employing over 50 people, found that anonymous applications reduced homophily – where people prefer people like themselves.

There was a reduction in female recruiters preferring females and males preferring males. And the impact persisted in later recruitment stages so the overall number of women hired also rose. However, the number of immigrants and those from poor neighbourhoods who were called for interview fell, so perhaps some of the effects of “positive” discrimination towards more disadvantaged people was removed.



Seeking anonymity. Peter Forret, CC BY-NC

So will removing names from CVs make a difference?

While the results of name-blind studies are not always consistent, and can vary across different countries, industries, sectors and groups, the evidence does suggest that removing names can increase the chances of certain potential employees moving onto the next stage of the recruitment process.

However, anonymising other CV application information may be needed to combat different forms of potential discrimination. This could extend to age and gender, of course, but also to nationality, your school (especially in Northern Ireland with its perceived link to a person's religion), or the street where you live.

More fundamentally, name-blind applications do not specifically help overcome other disadvantages (be it in educational opportunities, disability, having childcare responsibility etc.) that require more significant changes in support, resources and mindsets. Ultimately, they are only a small part of the answer to dealing with discrimination.