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SundayReview | OPINION

Job Interviews Without Gender

By KATHARINE ZALESKI   JAN. 6, 2018

I am a co-founder of a start-up that helps companies with their efforts to hire more women. In the fall, in meetings with potential clients in the San Francisco Bay Area, I became aware of a dangerous trend: Employers are turning to techniques that "mask" the gender of the candidates they interview — removing names from résumés and altering voices on phone calls, for example — with the hope that this will offer a quick fix to diversity failures.

These gender-masking tools and the related trend of "blind hiring" have recently been chronicled in The New York Times and Wired, and discussed at tech conferences. One head of talent at a major financial services company told me she's getting up to five pitches a week for tools that can mask applicants' gender. My team is regularly told by potential clients in the Fortune 100 that they are already using tools to obscure gender in hiring. Yelp has tried using a voice disguiser on initial interview calls to hide applicants' gender.

This is a misguided distraction from the hard work of evaluating and fixing the ways in which their cultures drive out the women who are actually hired.

I understand the appeal of gender-masking for companies that are rightly concerned that bias could be eliminating qualified female candidates, especially in tech roles, where women are severely underrepresented. In 2016, a group of

computer scientists compared acceptance rates for code written by women and men on the code repository GitHub. It found that developers accepted nearly 72 percent of code written by women when they did not know their gender. When it was revealed that women had written the code, acceptance rates fell to 62 percent. After reading this study, I suggested that using virtual reality — with candidates identifiable to interviewers only by avatar names — might be a promising way to keep sexism out of the hiring process.

But it has become clear that masking is, at best, a partial solution. While it might allow more women to get through interview rounds, there is little evidence that it would get more women hired. In fact, the low-tech version of masking — removing names from résumés — has been tried, without much documented success.

A Silicon Valley executive told me why this strategy failed at her company. First, the pool of female applicants was very small to start. Second, her team tended to discount a résumé with a gap that signaled it had been submitted by a woman who took time off for caregiving. A Stanford doctoral student, Sharon Jank, studied the gender-masking platform GapJumpers and came up with similar findings. Removing gender identifiers helped women through the first screening, but at traditional interviews, the positive effects were undone by hiring managers' biases.

The biggest problem with gender is that it allows companies to ignore the challenges of making their environments more inclusive. And it sends a confusing message to candidates — after all, if an employer needs to use masking because hiring managers can't be trusted to be open to diversity, why would women believe they'll belong and be treated fairly even if they are ultimately hired?

Gender-masking tools do nothing to address the culture of a company. One of the central reasons the number of women at tech companies remains so pitifully low is that these companies are not creating environments where women feel they can thrive.

I often hear from women who won't even apply to certain companies because they believe they'll be rejected after revealing that they're mothers of young children or caregivers to relatives, or that they have no interest in spending late hours at

company-sponsored Ping-Pong tournaments or gatherings at bars where lines of workplace propriety are often crossed.

Sadly, they're not off base. Over the summer a hiring manager at a major media company my start-up works with discounted a strong senior software engineer candidate after she told him she'd work 10 to 12 hours a day but occasionally needed to work remotely so that she could pick up her child from day care. "This isn't a nine-to-five organization," he responded.

By not being masked, at least she learned that company would be a terrible fit for her.

And what if her identity had been hidden? The hiring manager would have probably driven her from the job in a few months, wasting his time, her time and the company's resources.

Well-meaning executives often ask me what female candidates want from prospective employers. The answer is, women want to feel that they can belong and thrive within an organization's culture. They don't want to pretend that they aren't moms or that they are comfortable with bonding activities built for and by men.

Yes, half the battle is getting more women in the room, but the other half is assuring women they won't have to hide who they are when they show up.

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