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What's in a name? A job, maybe

Tavia Grant Globe and Mail Blog

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Job seekers with common anglophone names such as Greg Brown on their résumés get more responses from employers in Canada's three largest cities than applicants with foreign-sounding names – regardless of work experience, education or language proficiency, new research shows.

According to University of Toronto researchers Philip Oreopoulos and Diane Dechief, applications submitted by people with English-sounding names are 47 per cent more likely to receive callbacks than those with Indian or Chinese ones in Toronto, 39 per cent more likely in Montreal, and 20 per cent more likely in Vancouver.

The findings to be released Friday are consistent with Mr. Oreopoulos's 2009 research, which focused strictly on employers in the Toronto area.

His follow-up research explores why employers seem to discriminate against job applicants with foreign-sounding names. The researchers sent out close to 8,000 randomly created résumés for various job postings in the three cities between February and September of last year. The jobs required at least a bachelor's degree and four to six years of work experience. Some of the CVs had anglophone names such as Jill Smith,

while others had Greek, Indian or Chinese names such as Lukas Minsopoulos, and Yong Zhang.

The researchers found that people with Greek, Chinese and Indian names are less likely to hear back from employers. “Even for applicants with Canadian education and Canadian experience ... the result is concerning that there is a difference that’s generated from a name,” Mr. Oreopoulos said.

The second part of the research asked HR professionals why they think people with foreign-sounding names are less likely to be contacted for an interview. The HR people typically cited concern over language or social skills – a response that contradicts the fact that many résumés clearly cited Canadian experience and fluency in English and French.

“Subconscious” discrimination may explain why immigrants with foreign-sounding names get lower callback rates, Mr. Oreopoulos said.

The study comes amid a persistent gap between immigrant and Canadian-born employment rates and wages. The jobless rate for Canadian-born workers was 5.4 per cent last month, compared to 8.3 per cent for all immigrants and 13.4 per cent for recent immigrants, according to the Toronto Immigrant Employment Data Initiative. Wages of recent immigrants are about 49 per cent lower than native-born workers, census data show – even though immigrants typically have higher rates of education.

The authors cite several solutions to the problem. One is to train recruiters to be more aware of possible bias, and to consider better ways of discerning foreign-language ability.

The project was co-funded by Metropolis British Columbia and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

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