



When Race Gets In The Way

By Dr. Lorne Foster

Some career counselor's say that in a world where there are 40,000 different urban occupations, people don't just want a job, rather, they want to have meaningful work that makes a contribution.

So, they say, with a little on-line, psychometric testing, job-seekers can learn to identify and articulate their skills, aptitudes, values, personality traits and interests as they relate to their own career choices. With a counselor's expert technological and psychometric guidance, job-seekers are routinely assured that they can be matched up with the top 40 blue-ribbon job opportunities that fit nicely with their individual personality preferences.

"Remember"— as one web-counseling service provider announces — "good research can lead to more satisfying career decisions. [So] ... Tour the Career Fair you can attend in your pajamas! View the booths of hundreds of full-time and co-op/intern employers nationwide — bad hair days don't matter here!"

Twenty-first century career counseling is charged with the awesome responsibility of leading 21st century job seekers to the promise land. The idea of "tuning up your career" in this day-and-age means idolizing a definition of the world where the proper use of technology and technological guidance can enhance the relationship between individual initiative and social outcomes, through the creation of a direct and unencumbered access to society's political economy.

Now, let's consider an alternative hypothesis.

Let us suppose, for instance, we live in a world that is not only dominated by the forces of technology *but also* by the mediations of race – a techno-coloured world, if you will – a world where technological realities do not overcome race (with a little on-line assistance) so much as bring them into play. In this world, the entire "tuning up your career" industry might be seen to be based on a false unity between the individual and society that de-racializes life and commerce, in a way that superficially and treacherously disregards distinctions between human enterprise and social justice.

This alternative hypothesis may account for the results of a recent survey conducted by the British Broadcasting Corporation that revealed — quite apart from skills, aptitudes, values, personality traits and interests as they relate to career choice in British television and media — that ethnic minority applicants in that country still face major discrimination in the jobs market

CVs from six fictitious candidates – who were given traditionally White, Black African or Muslim names – were sent to 50 firms by Radio Five Live.

White "candidates" were far more likely to be given an interview than similarly qualified Black or Asian "names". The employers targeted by the undercover survey were selected at random from newspaper adverts and recruitment websites.

Many of the firms were well known and the jobs covered a range of fields. All the applicants were given the same standard of qualifications and experience, but their CVs were presented differently. Almost a quarter of applications by two candidates given traditionally "White" names – Jenny Hughes and John Andrews – resulted in interview offers. But only 9% of the "Muslim" applications, by the fictitious Fatima Khan and Nasser Hanif, prompted a similar response. Letters from the "Black" candidates, Abu Olasemi and Yinka Olatunde, had a 13% success rate.

The logical and “shocking” conclusion – suggested by the statistics and arrived at by the officials at the British Broadcasting Corporation as well as other media observers – is that many people recruiting for the private sector firms in England are harbouring inherently racist views.

In Canada, similar studies and “shocking” conclusions have also been expressed.

A recent Conference Board briefing, entitled *The Voices of Visible Minorities: Speaking Out on Breaking Down Barriers*, summarizes seven focus group discussions with successful immigrant and Canadian-born managers and professionals.

Participants in Conference Board focus groups, reported that organizations in Canada have regularized use of duplicitous terms like "lack of fit" to exclude talented visible minorities from senior positions. Immigrant visible minorities face particularly daunting barriers to achieving career success that go way beyond psychometric career counseling strategies – from lost opportunities because they speak with an accent to non-recognition of their work experience or credentials.

Many immigrants felt that in Canada, speaking with an accent or owning a foreign credential is often used by employers an excuse to screen them out of job competitions. As a consequence, many talented immigrants are routinely prevented from working in their fields, even in professions where labour shortages already exist.

In the end, we live in a world where the dynamics of human enterprise and social outcomes are primarily filtered through a techno-coloured lens – which is not always responsive to individual skills, aptitudes, values, personality traits and/or interests.

By contrast, objective research consistently reveals that a commitment to social justice has to recognize the need for collective over individual initiative when the situation demands. It also endorses the principle of social intervention for true equality, since equal outcomes in the workplace are unlikely to arise from competitive market-forces, or even an expert career tune-up by a seasoned counseling service professional.