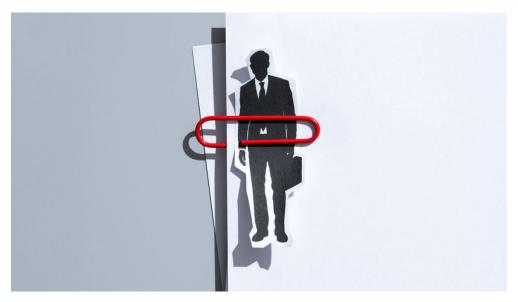**Digital Article** / Hiring and Recruitment

Research: The Benefits of Letting HR Decide Who Gets an Interview

A minor process change had major ramifications for who got hired—and how managers felt about HR's involvement. *by Almasa Sarabi and Nico Lehmann*

Published on HBR.org / May 16, 2025 / Reprint H08QAO

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In many organizations, managers make the first call about which candidates to bring in for an interview, and then later which applicant gets the job. While their expertise is crucial to selecting the right person, the process can be laborious and time-consuming as they must take a step away from their core activities to focus on reviewing applications and narrowing candidate pools. But what if the responsibility for picking first-round interviewees was transferred to HR? Does it have

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an impact on who gets hired? Our research, published in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, examines this scenario.

When a leading multinational technology company (for confidentiality reasons we'll refer to it as Alpha) transferred the task of shortlisting candidates from line managers to HR departments, more women were hired—even though the company had no particular aims to improve gender diversity among its male-dominated workforce.

Why? It turns out that HR professionals and managers approached the task of shortlisting much differently—which had ripple effects into who ended up filling a role. Our findings have major implications for companies looking for a simple way to reduce some of the inadvertent biases that can creep into the selection process.

The Research

In 2018, Alpha introduced a change to its hiring process. In the old system HR forwarded all applications to a line manager, who narrowed down the pool and conducted interviews. In the new process, managers would provide the job requirements to HR, then let HR select an initial seven applicants for the manager to interview (managers retained the final hiring decision). The company made the switch for one reason: to reduce unnecessary delays in the hiring process that might turn off top candidates.

Alpha did not make the change in the hiring process all at once. Instead, they introduced it across their worldwide subsidiary locations in seven phases, which gave us the unique opportunity to compare results before and after changes to the hiring process.

Analyzing data from 8,750 external hires over two years and across more than 60 country locations, we found that more women (a noticeable 9.2

percent increase) were hired into the company when the shortlisting was done by HR professionals.

We also found that this effect was the most pronounced in countries that had more-rigid views about which occupations women could work in, according to the UN's Gender Social Norms Index.

Why Did Gender Diversity Increase?

To answer this question, we drew on internal organizational data about the hired candidates and a dataset about Alpha's job listings. We also conducted both a company-wide survey and semi-structured interviews with managers and HR professionals.

We found the strongest evidence for the idea that the hiring disparities had been due in part to time constraints on the company's line managers. Time crunches often forced them to rely on subjective data —including recommendations from colleagues and assumptions about who best fit a role—to make quick decisions so that they could return to their work. This likely perpetuated the company's status quo, which was predominantly male. The HR department, on the other hand, was more likely to place greater weight on objective data about candidates and whether they fit the job description and requirements provided by managers.

Surveys also showed that HR employees were more likely to consider hiring an important part of their job, whereas managers were more likely to see it as a distraction from their day-to-day work.

Importantly, we also asked line managers how they felt about the candidates that HR selected and the overall job that they felt HR did in the new process. Before the intervention, 60% of line managers reported

being happy with HR's role in hiring. Post-intervention, that number jumped to 82%.

Considerations for Organizational Leaders

While we studied the impact of HR shortlisting at one company, our findings have implications for any organization seeking to expand their workforce beyond a dominant demographic group (for example, hospitals trying to recruit more male nurses).

Our research provides strong evidence that HR professionals—with their expert knowledge in evaluating candidates and fewer competing demands in investing time and effort in doing so—can offer more objective and consistent evaluation, helping to ensure a more equitable hiring process for applicants.

While it is outside our study in particular, our findings also have implications for how AI in hiring might work: training AI to evaluate applications based on clear and objective data points (years in a role, level of education, etc.) might help mitigate a reliance on stereotypes when determining who might best fit a role. However, simply transferring shortlisting to AI will not automatically prevent bias. In fact, many AI tools used in hiring have been accused of perpetuating biases in hiring by using biased data. Without proper incentives and oversight, decision-makers may blindly follow AI outputs or organizations might underinvest in training. A smarter approach is to treat AI as a support tool, guided by well-trained and properly incentivized HR professionals and managers who can supplement AI with their greater capacity for nuance and context.

Some Caveats

While the intervention we studied proved an effective way to improve the hiring process for applicants and managers, challenges remain. Our

study does not give any indication about how employees hired under the old or new hiring process fare in their subsequent organizational lives—do they feel they fit into the larger culture? We also lack data on productivity levels and actual (team) performance. Our tests further do not account for more subtle changes, such as those triggered by the increased interaction between HR and managers throughout the hiring process. While our study seems to have implications for improving diversity, we studied gender only, and can't speak to how this change may impact other types of diversity, such as age or race.

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Our findings suggest that letting HR select a first round of candidates can lead to fairer outcomes—without forfeiting the nuanced knowledge that line managers possess by allowing them to retain control over the final decision. With a small tweak, companies stand to reap the benefits of a more inclusive workforce.

This article was originally published online on May 16, 2025.

Almasa Sarabi is an assistant professor at Amsterdam Business School, University of Amsterdam (a.sarabi@uva.nl). She studies employment relationships with a focus on gender disparities in hiring and career advancement.

Nico Lehmann is an associate professor in the Department of Business Economics (Section: Accounting) at the Erasmus School of Economics, Erasmus University Rotterdam (lehmann@ese.eur.nl). His research interests are in the areas of corporate governance, information intermediation, and sustainability.