
The Disturbing Benefits of “White-Washing” a Résumé



By [Henrich Greve](#) , INSEAD Professor of Entrepreneurship

Four decades after the Civil Rights Act, students are “whitening” their résumés to increase their chance of getting a callback. What’s more disturbing is that research shows it works.

Presumptive GOP presidential nominee Donald Trump labelled President Barack Obama “Kenyan” and claimed he was born outside the U.S., and has also tweeted a picture of presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton with the text “Corrupt” and a red (not yellow) Star of David. What does that have to do with the title of this blog? Well, people’s perceptions are coloured by associations, and many have negative views of Africans (and African Americans) and Jews. And Asians (and Asian Americans).

So, how to get a job if you belong to any group that is subject to discrimination? Discrimination is well known, and both individual students and university career service advisors know the answer. A résumé can be “whitened” by removing signs such as a distinctive African American or Asian name, and by removing work experience or naming volunteer work (or even entire activities) that gives out racial signs. I know people who have

done it. It is disturbing both to them and to their friends, not least because any kind of résumé tampering has ethical implications, and the idea that one can improve the odds of getting a job by removing mention of volunteer work is so obviously wrong, even if it is correct.

Diversity claims “trap” students

In a [paper forthcoming](#) in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Sonia K. Kang, Katherine A. DeCelles, András Tilcsik, and Sora Jun examine both how and why people whiten résumés, and the effects it has. Let me start with the most shocking finding. Not only does whitening work, by giving higher likelihood of a callback (we knew this from prior research), but it works equally well for firms that signal a commitment to diversity. Firms that say they value diversity are therefore not truthful. But, students believe them, so they will engage in less whitening of their résumés when the employer has job listings that signal that they value a diverse workforce. Ironically, this turns statements on the value of diversity in job listings into a trap for job seekers, who will not whiten their résumés and suffer discrimination.

The study also provides insight into the thinking behind whitening through a series of in-depth interviews on how it was done, and why students would or would not whiten résumés. First, it was clear that whitening meant breaking a barrier: students believe in meritocracy, and value their own identity and experience. Doing it is as unpleasant as it sounds. But still, many (not all) students knew the risk of not getting callbacks if their résumés were not white enough, and chose to do it. The techniques used were largely truthful: a “white” hobby could be added, and any African American or Asian markers could be removed from voluntary organisation names. More radically, an Asian student could replace the given name with a chosen whitened one, or use both, and an African American student could pick the least African American-sounding name even if it was a middle name not normally used.

The findings are remarkable and discouraging because they are from the U.S., which is one of the most diverse and meritocratic job markets in the world. One might hope that time will work against the discrimination that values whitening, but then again, political and social signals are currently not encouraging.

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