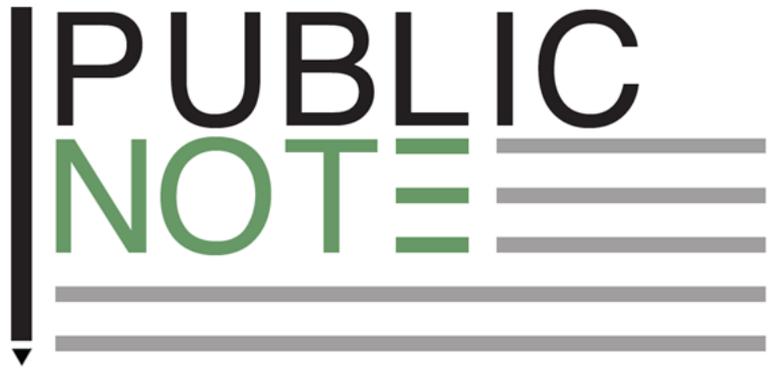


Representativeness of the Australian Public Service: The case for Anonymous Application Procedures

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This paper examines the representativeness of the public service, specifically of the Australian Public Service (APS). There is currently an underrepresentation of certain demographic groups. The reason for this could be cognitive biases of recruiters on the basis of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical and cognitive ability, socio-economic background and age. The public service is expected to be a reflection of the population it serves. For this reason, it is essential that the structural underrepresentation of marginalised groups in the APS is addressed. This paper therefore proposes the introduction of anonymous application procedures for entry-level positions in the Australian Public Service. This is an instrument which has shown to be effective in preventing recruiters' biases and heuristics from occurring and ensuring a diverse public service.

Key words: representative bureaucracy, diversity, labour market participation, discrimination, anonymous application procedures

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Evidence for practice

- The lack of representativeness of the Australian Public Sector (APS) is a persistent trend that can also be recognised in many other countries. The reason for this could be cognitive biases of recruiters against specific demographic groups.
- The introduction of anonymous application procedures for entry-level positions in the public service may prevent recruiters' biases and heuristics from occurring and ensure a diverse public service.
- Workshops to prevent unconscious biases during the recruitment procedure for recruiters can be made mandatory. It is also necessary for the candidates to know that they are de-identified in the procedure.
- This policy proposal does not resolve the underlying, structural issue regarding the inclusion of marginalised groups in society, which may require more fundamental changes.

The lack of representativeness of the Australian Public Sector (APS) is a persistent trend. The reason for this could be cognitive biases of recruiters against specific demographic groups. In order to prevent these biases and heuristics from occurring, this policy proposal recommends the introduction of an anonymous application procedure in the Australian Public Sector. First, the problem of underrepresentation is introduced in an Australian context. Subsequently, the proposed change of anonymous application procedures and the rationale for this are explained. Then, the introduction of anonymous application procedures in other countries is presented as case studies. Thirdly, a cost-benefit analysis is presented, and the proposal is critically assessed. The proposal ends with the notion that anonymous application procedures do not eliminate all forms of discrimination on the labour market. It can, however, equalise candidates' chances to be invited for an interview, and thus to being chosen for the position.

Introduction to the problem

As of December 2018, women made up 58.5 percent of the Australian Public Service (APS), but only 41.8 percent of the Senior Executive Service (The Australian Public Service Commission, 2019). The overall percentage of women in the APS has been stable since the 1980s, yet equal representation has not been achieved in leadership positions. The percentage of current APS employees who identify as being from a non-English speaking background is 14.3 percent, which does not mirror the Australian population with a non-English speaking background (Australian Public Service Committee, 2018). This is an issue that has been on the Australian federal political agenda for years, with the Australian Labor party as its advocate (Australian Labor Party, 2019). However, there is no consensus on how this issue should be addressed. Moreover, political debate on this matter has focused solely on underrepresentation of women, with no mention of other marginalised groups that face discrimination on the labour market, or about their lack of representation in leadership roles of the APS. The intersectionality of marginalised groups is systematically overlooked.

The lack of diversity in the APS could originate in a bias against certain demographic groups, such as biases based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical and cognitive ability, socio-economic background and age. The Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian Government (BETA) presents different cognitive biases when reviewing candidates in the recruitment procedure (2017). These biases are heuristics in judgements, which are mental shortcuts people make when they judge a situation based on one characteristic of an issue or person, ignoring other aspects (Bertrand et al, 2005). The biases BETA recognises are:

- In-group bias refers to the inclination of recruiters to prioritize candidates who are similar to themselves or the employees the recruiter is already working with. This bias excludes any candidates who are not considered a part of the homogeneous group of employees.
- Confirmation bias is the tendency recruiters might have to focus on specific information of candidates that confirms initial impressions. For example, if a person with a migration background applies for a position, the recruiter might think this population group has a lower proficiency of English. When there is a grammar mistake in their motivation letter, the candidate will be judged more harshly than a candidate without a migration background who makes the same mistake.
- The horn effect refers to the tendency of recruiters to focus on salient pieces of information of the candidate, which can then influence the perception of the other elements of the candidate. This occurs when the recruiter forms a negative opinion of a candidate based on one piece of information. For example, when a candidate is a woman, a recruiter might then assume she lacks leadership skills and is irrational in decision-making. This is problematic in the recruitment process, as the recruiter might not be able to separate factual information about a candidate from assumed information.
- Status quo bias occurs when recruiters select candidates who are similar to previously hired candidates and current employees. This bias keeps the diversity, or lack thereof, in a workplace.

Unequal access to employment opportunities for certain groups of the population has severe implications for both the labour market and the individuals who are affected (Krause et al., 2012). Moreover, the public sector is expected to be a reflection of the population it represents, as embedded in the representative bureaucracy theory (e.g. Riccucci and Van Ryzin, 2017). There is therefore both a business case to be made, as well as an intrinsic value to a representative bureaucracy.

Proposed changes and rationale

To prevent these biases from occurring during the initial stages of the recruitment procedure, an anonymous application procedure can be introduced for all entry-level positions of the Australian Public Service. Besides this instrument, structural attention should be given to this issue. This can be in the form of workshops to prevent unconscious biases during the recruitment procedure for recruiters.

Proposed change

During an anonymous application procedure (AAP), the demographic characteristics of an applicant are de-identified. These characteristics may include gender, age, living address, languages spoken, possible disabilities, name and photo. The idea is that by leaving out this information, recruiters cannot know these characteristics and discriminate against them. Demographic groups against whom discrimination may occur include women, older candidates, candidates who live in neighbourhoods with a lower socio-economic status, candidate with a non-English or a migration background, members of the LGBT+ community and candidates with disabilities (Åslund & Skans, 2012; Krause et al., 2012; Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2016).

This approach was first introduced by Golden & Rouse (2000), who studied the effect of “blind” auditions to examine the extent of discrimination during auditions for orchestras in the United States, and the effectiveness of blinding the recruiters from the candidates. By not being able to take the demographic information of the candidates into account, the recruiters could only base their decision on the actual performance of the candidates. The introduction of these so-called blind auditions accounted for a 25 percent increase of the number of women in orchestras from 1970 to 1996. De-identifying candidates can therefore lead to a more diverse workplace.

Rationale

There are numerous reasons why diversity in the workplace is beneficial. According to the Australian Workforce Agency of Gender Equality (WAGE) (2018), diversity in the workplace is key to boosting Australia’s productivity and innovation. WAGE also argues that a diverse and inclusive workforce generates increased efficiency, innovation, productivity, creativity and improved employee engagement. Having a diverse organisation leads to more perspectives on issues and prevents echo-chambers from happening. Furthermore, organisations that are more diverse may also be more appealing for minority candidates (WAGE, 2018). The implementation of anonymous application procedures has led to a more diverse group of candidates in other countries, such in some cities in The Netherlands (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2016). More people from ethnic minorities applied to positions when there was a de-identification procedure than when there was a procedure without de-identification. There was also more variety in the ages of the candidates. This could imply that de-identification of

application procedures generates a higher workforce participation, because the workplace is more diverse and approachable. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines diversity as not only a mix of different backgrounds and competences, but also valuing and using employees’ competences, experience, and perspective to improve government (2009). The OECD also argues that diversity in the Public Service helps to preserve core

public service values, such as fairness, transparency, impartiality and representativeness. It may also contribute to raising the quality of public services by improving the needs of a community and ameliorating social dialogue. Furthermore, diversity may contribute to social mobility. Overall, diversity can help promote good governance

by improving the relations between the government and citizens. By introducing anonymous application procedures, diversity is encouraged, as different case studies have indicated.

Case studies

Different European countries have introduced anonymous application procedures, both small and large scale. Most were experiments, but some were introduced permanently in the public sector after the experimental phase. Experiments in Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Australia (Victoria) will be discussed.

Germany

Following a study into the extent of discrimination on the labour market in Germany, the German Government set out an experiment to assess whether the de-identification of applicants would lead to an ethnically more diverse workforce (Krause et al., 2012). The first study concluded that applicants with a Turkish-sounding name were less likely to receive an invitation for a job interview than applicants with a German-sounding name. The relevant work experience of the candidates was similar. During the experiment that followed, the applicant’s name, gender, nationality, date and place of birth, possible disabilities, marital status, and the applicant’s picture were not shown. The experiment was not set in the public sector, but in different German organisations and firms. Applicants were only de-identified in the first stage of the process, i.e. when a shortlist of candidates was decided. The short-listed candidates were then invited for an interview, which was also the moment their identity was fully revealed. The mode of de-identification was the use of a standardised form. During the evaluations of the experiment, both the recruiters and the applicants indicated that they did not have major practical problems

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when filling in the standardised application forms. Applicants also indicated they felt more encouraged to apply to positions, knowing that they would be reviewed anonymously. The results of this experiment include that ethnic minority candidates are more likely to be selected for an interview when the job applications were anonymous. This means that this group cannot face systematic different probabilities of interview invitations after the introduction of anonymous job applications. The study lacks sufficient male candidates to assess whether the same effect is statistically significant for women. Following the results of this study, different Bundesländer of Germany have started their own pilots.

France

In France, a law in 2006 passed that prescribes the use of anonymous resumes for firms which have more than 50 employees (Behaghel, 2011). However, there are no legal consequences if a firm does not actively implement this policy. Between 2010 and 2011, the French Public Employment Service (PES) implemented an experiment on the impact of anonymous resumes to decide on the enforcement of this law. This experiment focussed on gender discrimination, rather than ethnic discrimination. Around a thousand firms participated in the experiment. The PES de-identified the applications for these firms, rather than starting with a standardised form. The de-identification included gender, name, address, portrait picture, age, marital status, and number of children. The results included that women were invited to an interview more often when their resume was reviewed anonymously than when it was reviewed with their gender visible. It was also concluded that anonymous reviewing of applications reduces in-group bias: the tendency of female recruiters to select female candidates, and male recruiters to select male candidates. The vacancies in this experiment were not in the public service, but nevertheless provide a useful perspective on the implementation and effects of anonymous resumes.

The Netherlands

Following a study into the state of labour market discrimination in the city of The Hague in the Netherlands, the city council started a pilot of anonymous application procedures (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2015). The previous study had concluded that candidates of Moroccan and Surinam descent had a lower probability of being invited to an interview than candidates with an ethnically Dutch descent. Moreover, candidates of Moroccan and Surinam descent with relatively more relevant work experience had an equal chance of being selected as candidates with an ethnically Dutch descent who had relatively less work experience. The pilot started in 2015 (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2016). The procedure was only

used in middle to high positions within the municipality of the Hague, and the focus was on ethnic minorities and discrimination against candidates from lower socio-cultural neighbourhoods. A candidate's name, gender, ethnicity, age, and address were left out of the first round of the procedure. This way, recruiters could only assess candidates on the basis of their education and relevant work experience. Candidates were told up front that they would be de-identified. A year into the pilot, there was a rise from 24.1 percent to 31.4 percent of candidates that were selected for the positions who had a migration background. Another trend was that more people with a migration background applied to the positions than when there was no anonymous application procedure. After the pilot ended, the anonymous application procedure policy was permanently implemented (Gemeente Den Haag, n.d.).

Victoria (Australia)

Lastly, the government of Victoria initiated a programme to address unconscious biases in recruitment. 'Recruit Smarter' ran from 2016 to 2017 and introduced, among other measures, a de-identification of CVs (Department of Premier and Cabinet Victoria, the Centre of Ethical Leadership & University of Melbourne, 2018). 46 organisations across the public, private, community, non-government and research sectors participated in the initiative. These included organisations such as the Department of Premier and Cabinet, Department of Treasury and Finance, and the Department of Justice and Regulation. Also, organisations such as VicRoads and Hall & Wilcox were included. The results included an eight percent rise of overseas-born candidates to be shortlisted for a position. Women were also eight percent more likely to be shortlisted after the de-identification. Applicants from a lower ranked socio-economic suburb were 9.4 percent more likely to progress through the selection process and receive a job after de-identification. Before the de-identification, men were 30 percent more likely to be shortlisted and 33 percent more likely to be hired. After the de-identification, men were 6 percent more likely to be shortlisted than women, and 8 percent more likely to be hired than women. Besides the de-identification of CVs, the recruiters followed training to prevent unconscious biases. The report recommends that any organisations that experiment with de-identification of CVs should also include a mandatory cognitive bias training curriculum. This should cover theories on heuristics in judgement, the socioeconomic cost of exclusion and the benefits of diversity.

Cost-Benefit analysis & Critical assessment

Cost-Benefit Analysis

The costs of anonymous application procedures seem to depend on the method of de-identification. Using a standardised application form lays the burden of de-identification with the candidate, while de-identifying after the applications have arrived lays the burden with the party which is recruiting. Krause et al. (2012) argue that the use of standardised forms does not lead to more costs than the normal procedure. Behaghel et al. (2011), however, argue that the costs of the procedure will be higher, as it will take more time to get to know the candidates. The evaluation survey conducted after the pilot in the Hague (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2016) concluded that some candidates found it time-consuming to fill in a standardised form, and that they felt like they could not express themselves fully. However, the administrative costs of having a separate body which de-identifies applications when they arrive would be high. Standardised application forms, together with a motivation letter present themselves as the optimal method. It is crucial that the candidate knows that the application is anonymous.

Critical assessment

The adoption of anonymous application procedures should also be critically assessed, and alternatives should be presented, considering that it is one option out of other policy options to achieve a diverse public service. This proposal can be embedded in the first of two theoretical perspectives through which a representativeness can be achieved: through an equality or an equity approach (ECHO, 2021). Where the former attempts to achieve representativeness through treating applicants equally, and seeing ‘blind’ of applicants’ characteristics, the latter focuses on being conscious of characteristics. This position recognises that each candidate has a different background, making an equal starting position impossible and therefore encourages recruiters to accommodate differences to achieve a representative bureaucracy. An example of equity-based representativeness is affirmative action, in which a candidate from an underrepresented demographic group is preferred over a candidate from an overrepresented demographic group when their competences are equal. The use of quotas for underrepresented demographic groups is also a strategy in which equity-based hiring is encouraged. The use of anonymous application procedures is embedded in an equality-based ideal.

It should be noted that the lack of representativeness is only an overt symptom of what are, in fact, structural institutional barriers that exclude marginalised groups (see e.g. Kriton and Greene, 2015). It is therefore crucial to acknowledge that an anonymous application procedure cannot solve this problem on its own. It may only prevent recruiters’ biases and heuristics from occurring during the initial recruitment process.

Therefore, this policy proposal does not address the underlying issue regarding the inclusion of marginalised groups in Australian society, which may require more fundamental changes. Moreover, the organisation needs not only be diverse and representative, but also an inclusive organisation in which the whole of Australian society feels welcome and invited to participate. For this goal, an equity-based approach might be favoured over an equality-based approach.

Another difficulty that should be recognised is that recruiters may still be able to distil aspects of a candidate’s identity from other information than the literal identifiers. For example, ethnicity can still be distilled from languages spoken and education background. This is especially true for a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. Aboriginal students are overrepresented in schools in the Northern Territory and significantly underrepresented in the other states and territories of Australia. However, education background is important to assess a candidate’s competences. It is still also possible to estimate age based on the age the candidate started working and years of experience.

Lastly, the public sector is diverse in terms of organisations and responsibilities. It has not been examined if the use of anonymous applications procedures would have the same results across the Australian Public Sector. Ultimately, these difficulties require a trade-off of public values and the introduction of anonymous application procedures is therefore an inherently political decision. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to the issue of representative bureaucracy.

Concluding notes

Anonymous application procedures could eliminate discrimination against marginalised groups during the initial stages of the application procedure. The policy has been tested and, in some countries, also adopted. However, it should be noted that minorities face systematic discrimination, which can lead to them having less relevant work experience than is needed for a position because of a lack of opportunities. Therefore, anonymous application procedures do not eliminate all forms of discrimination on the labour market. It can, however, equalise candidates’ chances to be invited for an interview, and thus to being chosen for the position. The way of de-identification is also crucial to achieving equalisation. De-identification should not solely focus on gender, but also on other identities. In other words, the intersectionality of these identities should be taken into account. Lastly, there should also be training in preventing cognitive biases for recruiters so that they are fully aware of the advantages of diversity and the dangers of mental shortcuts.

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