



# Employers Tap Software and Soft Skills to Improve Gender Diversity

By Dinah Wisenberg Brin

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**T**o tackle gender bias in the workplace, employers are turning to an array of new software options and adopting training programs to foster diversity.

With research suggesting that workplace diversity is good for business,

([www.shrm.orghttp://www.catalyst.org/system/files/The\\_Bottom\\_Line\\_Corporate\\_Performance\\_and\\_Womens\\_Representation\\_on\\_Boards.pdf](http://www.shrm.orghttp://www.catalyst.org/system/files/The_Bottom_Line_Corporate_Performance_and_Womens_Representation_on_Boards.pdf)) and the reality that managers may not recognize their own biases, it is little wonder that companies seek outside help to make their workplaces more inclusive.

"Bias comes in many forms, and it's really difficult for most folks to come to recognize the biases we all have. So we're supposed to be eradicating bias, but often times those biases rear their ugly heads," said HR technology analyst William Tincup, CEO of Tincup & Co., in an interview with *SHRM Online*.

"From a technology perspective, we're making really good strides here," he said, citing a self-described "blind recruiting" app from Blendoor ([www.shrm.orghttp://www.blendoor.com/](http://www.shrm.orghttp://www.blendoor.com/)) in San Francisco that aims to match candidates to jobs based on merit alone. The app conceals candidates' photos and names.

The Blendoor app hides things on a resume "that folks might be biased for or against," Tincup said. "It forces recruiters to look at merits rather than other things that might influence them."

## Diversity Improves the Bottom Line

According to recent research from McKinsey & Company, companies that are ethnically and gender diverse outperform companies that aren't by 50 percent.

"We know intuitively that diversity matters. It's also increasingly clear that it makes sense in purely business terms," according to McKinsey's 2015 *Diversity Matters* report. ([www.shrm.orghttp://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/why-diversity-matters](http://www.shrm.orghttp://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/why-diversity-matters))

"Our latest research finds that companies in the top quartile for gender or racial and ethnic diversity are more likely to have financial returns above their national industry medians."

Yet science and technology industries wrestle with gender-diversity problems. Earlier this year, the National Center for Women & Information Technology noted data ([www.shrm.orghttps://www.ncwit.org/sites/default/files/resources/ncwit\\_women-in-it\\_2016-full-report\\_final-web06012016.pdf](http://www.shrm.orghttps://www.ncwit.org/sites/default/files/resources/ncwit_women-in-it_2016-full-report_final-web06012016.pdf)) showing that, while women hold 57 percent of U.S. professional jobs, they hold only 25 percent of computing occupations and 17 percent of *Fortune* 500 chief information officer positions.

A 2012 study by Yale University ([www.shrm.orghttp://www.pnas.org/content/109/41/16474](http://www.shrm.orghttp://www.pnas.org/content/109/41/16474)) researchers further illustrates the bias problem. In the study, more than 125 science faculty members from research-oriented universities evaluated application materials for a student—assigned either a male or female name—seeking a lab manager job. While the applications were identical, faculty members showed bias against the female candidate, rating the man as far more competent and assigning him a higher starting salary.

### Bias-Neutralizing Software

Some companies, like artificial intelligence-driven Textio ([www.shrm.orghttp://blog.textio.com/post/126482044107/fortune-500-gender-bias](http://www.shrm.orghttp://blog.textio.com/post/126482044107/fortune-500-gender-bias)) of Seattle and hiring app startup Unitive of San Francisco, offer software to help employers produce bias-free job descriptions. Others use game technology to match job candidates to employers.

Mercer, a New York City-based consulting firm, developed an online game platform, Mercer Match ([www.shrm.orghttps://mercermatch.com/](http://www.shrm.orghttps://mercermatch.com/)), to help eliminate hiring bias. Job candidates play 12 short games to get a trait and career report. They are then matched to suitable industries, companies or roles.

"Mercer Match works like a blind audition. We look at candidates' underlying cognitive, social and emotional traits as opposed to their resumes as the first data point," said Patty Sung, principal of the Mercer Innovation Hub in Hoboken, N.J.

Recommending candidates based on these traits "will eliminate HR or hiring manager unconscious bias towards gender, school, ethnicity background and the like," she told *SHRM Online*. "This approach will allow companies to screen more 'nontraditional' candidates—candidates they don't typically look at—in versus out."

One financial services firm used the underlying technology to draw more diverse candidates for an equity research position. Men typically make up 75 percent of the firm's applicants, but, by using the tool, the business attracted 51 percent male and 49 percent female applicants, Sung said. "In addition, it helped achieve ethnicity and socioeconomic diversity as well."

A global study ([www.shrm.orghttp://www.mercer.com/content/dam/mercer/attachments/private/nurture-cycle/WWT-Executive-Summary-2016.pdf](http://www.shrm.orghttp://www.mercer.com/content/dam/mercer/attachments/private/nurture-cycle/WWT-Executive-Summary-2016.pdf)) from Mercer, which also helps employers with other gender-related workplace challenges, says women make up only 35 percent of the average company's professional and higher-level workforce, and current hiring and promotions won't create equality in the next decade.

Mercer developed Mercer Match with Harvard/MIT startup Pymetrics ([www.shrm.orghttps://pymetrics.com/](http://www.shrm.orghttps://pymetrics.com/)) and invested in the New York City company late last year. It uses neuroscience games as blind auditions to match applicants with compatible careers and companies. Glassbreakers ([www.shrm.orghttps://www.glassbreakers.co/](http://www.shrm.orghttps://www.glassbreakers.co/)) in San Francisco offers "inclusion software" for employee retention and says that for every 1 percent increase in gender and ethnic diversity, sales revenue increases by 3 percent and 9 percent, respectively.

SAP, meanwhile, announced in May that it would edit its SuccessFactors staffing software suite to help companies remove bias from job descriptions, performance reviews and other "people processes."

While the global population of available talent is increasingly diverse, companies face a significant talent shortage because current processes don't help them recruit all available talent, according to David Ludlow, SAP's global vice president of product marketing.

"Diversity is no longer a cultural nice-to-have; it has become a business imperative to drive attraction, retention and engagement of all available talent," he told *SHRM Online*.

"The conversation is starting to evolve from diversity, which is about numbers, to inclusion, which is about culture."

### Soft Skills Raise Awareness

About two years ago, leaders at cloud software company VMware Inc. of Palo Alto, Calif., participated in a talk with an expert on social attitudes and unbiased thinking.

"Coming out of that discussion, our leaders wanted to attack the challenge of reversing the social trend of unconscious bias, and they agreed that we can't achieve our diversity mission unless we shut bias down," said Betsy Sutter, VMware's corporate senior vice president and chief people officer, in an interview with *SHRM Online*.

VMware worked with the Stanford University corporate partnership ([www.shrm.orghttps://womensleadership.stanford.edu/corporate](http://www.shrm.orghttps://womensleadership.stanford.edu/corporate)) at the Clayman Institute, which helps companies advance opportunities for women, to commit to a learning program "so people understand unconscious bias and know what actions to take to block it. The training is one element of an overall change strategy to root bias out of systems and processes."

For job descriptions, VMware considers requirements versus what would be "nice to have," she said. Descriptions include both "I" language, such as "bold," "decisive" and "driven," and "we" wording, such as "collaborative," "dedicated" and "helpful." Research shows that "I" words trigger perceptions that the job is male-dominated and decreases its appeal to women, she said.

The training goes beyond writing job descriptions. "Managers take the training to make sure bias doesn't creep into performance discussions," Sutter said. And VMware sends reminders "to keep this thinking top of mind throughout the year."

Cisco uses ethnically and gender-diverse interview panels for hiring opportunities, said Shari Slate, the company's chief inclusion and collaboration officer. Data shows that using the panels increases the odds of hiring a woman by 50 percent and boosts the hiring of Latino and black employees by 50 percent to 70 percent, respectively, she said.

Cisco also requires diversity training for all talent recruiters and anti-bias training for managers and executives.

Marc Prosser, co-founder of New York City-based Fit Small Business ([www.shrm.orghttp://fitsmallbusiness.com/](http://www.shrm.orghttp://fitsmallbusiness.com/)), reviews candidates' answers to knowledge-based surveys before looking at anyone's name on a resume. "This allows us to qualify and disqualify based on knowledge, writing style and level of effort put into the survey," Prosser told *SHRM Online*. "This way I can't make any assumptions as to what their gender or ethnicity is."

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