

# Right résumé, wrong name

MARINA JIMÉNEZ

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You are more likely to land a job interview if your name is John Martin or Emily Brown rather than Lei Li or Tara Singh – even if you have the same Canadian education and work experience.

These are the findings of a new study analyzing how employers in the Greater Toronto Area responded to 6,000 mock résumés for jobs ranging from administrative assistant to accountant.

Across the board, those with English names such as Greg Johnson and Michael Smith were 40 per cent more likely to receive callbacks than people with the same education and job experience with Indian, Chinese or Pakistani names such as Maya Kumar, Dong Liu and Fatima Sheikh.

The findings not only challenge Canada's reputation as a country that celebrates diversity, but also underscore the difficulties that even highly skilled immigrants have in the labour market.

Moreover, there was nothing in the study to reveal whether the “foreign-sounding” names were those of immigrants or of people born in Canada, suggesting that the offspring of immigrants also face name discrimination.

“When sorting through résumés, employers are making split-second decisions based on subconscious stereotypes that they may not even be aware of,” said Philip Oreopoulos, a University of British Columbia economist, and author of the study.

A recent U.S. study of employers in Chicago and Boston found a similar degree of name discrimination. Those with “white-sounding” names were 50 per cent more likely to be called for an interview for a blue-collar job than those with African-American names.

But Prof. Oreopoulos didn't expect Canadian employers to be as prejudiced. Canada's much-lauded immigration program recruits highly skilled immigrants with the expectation that they will be quickly absorbed into the labour market.

In recent years, as source countries have shifted to Asia from Europe, unemployment rates among immigrants have been rising, despite high levels of education. In 2006, the unemployment rate for immigrants was 11.5 per cent, compared with 4.9 per cent for the Canadian-born population.

Without an interview, Prof. Oreopoulos suggested, there is no chance for those with foreign-sounding names to show employers that their English is fluent and their social etiquette appropriate.

For the study, released last week by Metropolis, an immigration and diversity research network, each of the 6,000 résumés sent out listed a bachelor's degree and four to six years of work experience. They were tailored to job requirements and sent to 2,000 online job postings from employers across 20 occupational categories, including administrative, financial, marketing, programming and retail.

Sixteen per cent of those with English names received a callback, compared with 11 per cent for applicants with Pakistani, Indian and Chinese names who had the same level of education and job experience.

The callback rate dropped to 8 per cent for those with foreign-sounding names who had been educated outside Canada but had Canadian job experience. It dropped to 5 per cent for those who also lacked Canadian job experience.

The mock résumés also listed specific skills such as "highly motivated" and "fast learner," as well as fluency in multiple languages, and extracurricular activities such as competitive squash player, classical pianist and volunteer for Habitat for Humanity.

But none of these attributes had any particular impact. Employers also didn't value masters degrees from prestigious foreign universities.

“Unfortunately, the study shows an applicant's name matters considerably more than his or her additional education, multiple language skills and extracurricular activities,” Prof. Oreopoulos concluded.

There was only marginally less discrimination for jobs with less of a need for speaking and writing skills, such as accountants, computer programmers and web developers.

This study does confirm that Canadian job experience is important to employers – more than a degree from a Canadian institution.

Prof. Oreopoulos acknowledges that ambiguity is part of any hiring process. Being aware of prejudices, however, will help employers screen for the right attributes.

“Correcting accidental tendencies of employers to favour native Caucasian candidates may lead to better hires,” he said.

Ironically, second-generation immigrants of Chinese and Indian origin statistically have above-average incomes and educations.