



ASA NEWS

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Employers Often More Interested in Hiring Potential Playmates Than the Very Best Candidates

WASHINGTON, DC, November 27, 2012 — Employers are often more focused on hiring someone they would like to hang out with than they are on finding the person who can best do the job, suggests a study in the December issue of the *American Sociological Review*.

“Of course, employers are looking for people who have the baseline of skills to effectively do the job,” said study author Lauren A. Rivera, an assistant professor of management and organizations and sociology at Northwestern University. “But, beyond that, employers really want people who they will bond with, who they will feel good around, who will be their friend and maybe even their romantic partner. As a result, employers don’t necessarily hire the most skilled candidates.”

Titled, “Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms,” the study is based on 120 interviews with professionals involved in undergraduate and graduate hiring in elite U.S. investment banks, law firms, and management consulting firms as well as participant observation of a recruiting department. Rivera conducted the interviews—40 per industry—from 2006 through 2008 and the fieldwork within the recruiting department of an elite professional service firm over nine months in 2006 and 2007.

According to the study, which Rivera said is the first systematic, empirical investigation of whether shared culture between employers and job candidates matters in hiring, evaluators at firms often valued their personal feelings of comfort, validation, and excitement over identifying candidates with superior cognitive or technical skills. In fact, more than half of the evaluators in the study ranked cultural fit—the perceived similarity to a firm’s existing employee base in leisure pursuits, background, and self-presentation—as the most important criterion at the job interview stage.

“It is important to note that this does not mean employers are hiring unqualified people,” Rivera said. “But, my findings demonstrate that—in many respects—employers hire in a manner more closely resembling the choice of friends or romantic partners than how one might expect employers to select new workers. When you look at the decision to date or marry someone what you think about is commonalities. Do you have a similar level of education? Did you go to a similar caliber school? Do you enjoy similar activities? Are you excited to talk to each other? Do you feel the spark? These types of things are salient at least to the employers I’ve studied.”

The study also found that the cultural similarities valued at elite professional service firms have important socioeconomic dimensions. “Evaluators are predominately white, Ivy League-educated, upper-middle or upper class men and women who tend to have more stereotypically masculine leisure pursuits and favor extracurricular activities associated with people of their background,” Rivera said. “Given that less affluent students are more likely to believe that achievement in the classroom rather than on the field or in the concert hall matters most for future success and focus their energies accordingly, the types of cultural similarities valued in elite firms’ hiring processes has the potential to create inequalities in access to elite jobs based on parental socioeconomic status.”

As for whether her findings about the importance of cultural fit in hiring practices at elite professional service firms are generalizable across other types of occupations, Rivera said they likely are to some extent. “I think that the process is generalizable, but I think the degree to which cultural similarity matters in the decision to hire varies across occupations depending on their technical demands, their degree of social demands, and how structured interviews are,” Rivera said. “So, for example, if you were hiring a neurosurgeon, I think there would be more of an emphasis on performance than cultural fit.”

In addition, Rivera said the types of cultural similarities employers value may not be the same for all occupations. "Cultivating leisure time is a hallmark of the upper-middle and upper classes, and it's really important as a class marker and as a source of identity," she said. "You may see different types of cultural similarities that matter in occupations that are less elite."

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The American Sociological Association (www.asanet.org), founded in 1905, is a non-profit membership association dedicated to serving sociologists in their work, advancing sociology as a science and profession, and promoting the contributions to and use of sociology by society. The *American Sociological Review* is the ASA's flagship journal.

The research article described above is available by request for members of the media. For a copy of the full study, contact Daniel Fowler, ASA's Media Relations and Public Affairs Officer, at (202) 527-7885 or pubinfo@asanet.org.