A 5 a child, Philip was an average boy who knew next to nothing about programming. He did not grow up in a tech-savvy household, nor was he a self-taught coding wizard. While studying at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) as a freshman, he purportedly “could not code” (his way out of a paper bag).

But he had one advantage which convinced employers to offer him many great opportunities. Philip is an Asian, and many employers fell for the “model minority” stereotype, believing that he was a tech genius. They provided him internship and assistantship opportunities that many of a different race or gender would envy.

The above story is from an article in Slate written by Philip Guo, a UC San Diego cognitive science professor. It revealed that despite the best of intentions and the belief in their own rational hiring process, people are still victims of stereotype and prejudice. Factors like race, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and disabilities oftentimes affect a hiring manager’s decisions, either consciously or unconsciously.

WHY ARE WE PREJUDiced?

Psychologists have long studied why people label one another based on simplistic stereotypes and make prejudiced assumptions about one another. According to Nobel Prize-winning psychologist, Daniel Kahneman, human reasoning can be understood in terms of two systems: the fast and the slow. These two systems are the subject of his bestselling book, Thinking Fast and Slow. To put it simply, the fast system makes quick, automatic decisions through simple rules-of-thumb, or emotional reactions. The slow system, on the other hand, is the rational side of our minds that puts the brakes on the fast system. It takes a longer time to come to a conclusion, requiring more mental effort and taking into account a complex array of factors, but eventually arrives at a more well-considered solution.

When forced to sift through stacks of resumes, human resources (HR) personnel often falsely perceive as “workhorses”—capable of doing difficult and mentally-straining tasks, but lacking the social and leadership skills to do well in top positions.

Asians, especially Asian women, are severely under-represented in top management positions, as one analysis of the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) showed. Negative stereotypes also hold women back from advancing in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) careers, as an experiment by Ernesto Reuben at Columbia Business School revealed. The experiment showed that when there is a lack of sufficient information to judge a candidate’s qualifications (such as not knowing the candidate’s math scores), managers tend to favour men vastly over women. As a result of this bias, talented women were, more often than not, rejected in favour of untalented men for STEM-related jobs.

WAYS TO TACKLE THE ISSUE

Frank Dobbin, sociologist from Harvard, has examined the effectiveness of various diversity policies for alleviating these problems. Although “diversity training” has become popular among HR departments, it has achieved limited success.

Dobbin found that having a diverse workforce is more effective. A diverse workforce is a group of managers responsible for ensuring fairness in hiring, retaining and promoting talent of various backgrounds.

In addition, Dobbin’s study also found that diversity can be significantly improved with a “supply-side” strategy. There are ways that employers and job-seekers can take matters into their own hands to improve their chances of being hired or promoted.

Dobbin found that the most effective strategy was to seek out mentors. Mentors are crucial for imparting wisdom, knowledge and skills to marginalized groups. This is important in helping minorities navigate through the corporate environment.

Mentors provide valuable networks at the upper levels of an organisation. Mentorship also helps to reduce stereotyping, as each individual is seen as a person capable of learning and growing, as opposed to a simplistic label.

HOW COMMITTED ARE WE TO DIVERSITY?

In recent years, organisations have improved their methods of promoting diversity. There is growing realisation that people should be viewed as unique individuals who are able to contribute when given the opportunity. Nowhere is this more evident than in a firm commitment to eradicating discrimination.

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