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Week's Top Letter #1: Moving away from grades requires redefining success



As changes happen in the workplace - with employers becoming more explicit with the desired traits and designing hiring practices to minimise the influence of bias - changes ought to follow in the classroom too. PHOTO: ST FILE

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The eagerness of employers to justifiably reduce the disproportionate reliance on grades for their hiring practices overlooks the important point that there is also no perfect, bias-free indicator for this purpose.

Instead of adding more application requirements or subjecting job applicants to a battery of tests and assessments, improvements should focus on a more holistic evaluation - not in the antiquated sense of making the process more onerous but, rather, in terms of accounting for the backgrounds and trajectories of applicants, to consequently reduce bias.

In this vein, rather than following the cited challenge "to hire up to 10 per cent of employees 'blind to resumes and grades', but instead choose them based on their traits", employers could be encouraged to be more cognisant of how demographic traits - such as gender, race, educational background, schools, as well as other socio-economic variables - could bias their decisions (Hiring: Grades matter but other factors vital, Jan 31).

Furthermore, the imprecision of what is meant by "character traits" only obfuscates the application process, and is also likely to benefit students and young applicants from more privileged households.

It is no surprise, therefore, that successful applicants or employees of comparatively disadvantaged circumstances appear as exceptions, rather than the norm.

Their counterparts, on the other hand, are able to game the system by getting tips or extra training for psychometric profiling assessments or group interviews. They can also pay professional companies to draft cover letters or application documents to stand out, as well as have more time and bandwidth to engage in a variety of co-curricular projects or community activities so as to enhance their curriculum vitae.

As changes happen in the workplace - with employers becoming more explicit with the desired traits and designing hiring practices to minimise the influence of bias - changes ought to follow in the classroom too.

In addition to the ongoing improvements to education and career guidance in schools, grades are still an important determinant for school and pathway selection, for access to enrichment programmes and services and, ultimately, for advancement to universities.

Any move away from the obsession with grades is hence contingent on broadening and accepting different notions of success and, like the aforementioned proposals for employers, schools and their teachers ought to follow through holistically too.

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