

AI's hiring practices need a human touch

IN finds out how employers are using AI tools to recruit people responsibly and what they are doing to weed out outdated attitudes that are discriminatory and biased.



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In 2014, Amazon thought it had built an amazing tool for its human resources department. Staff uploaded hundreds of resumes to an AI-powered engine that rated and selected the best candidates for jobs, saving staff hundreds of hours of reading and comparing applications.

But within a year, people realised something was very wrong. The system was actively discriminating against women applicants. What happened?

It turns out that engineers had “trained” its AI tool using a decade’s worth of historical hiring data – and because the tech industry is very male-dominated, the AI’s logic “taught” it that being male was a prerequisite. Even though it was not explicitly told to screen out women, the tool taught itself to look out for and exclude resumes that cited attending all-women’s universities or being on a “women’s rugby team”.

What a fiasco. Even though the team tried to fix its AI model, by 2017 it eventually decided to decommission it. This case was a watershed moment in the use of AI by recruiters and it was cited by the experts IN interviewed for this story as a cautionary tale.

Human oversight still needed

To be clear, “bias did not begin with AI; human biases have always existed”, said Singapore Polytechnic’s Emma Meyer, a senior manager with the Business Innovation Centre. She looks at workforce transformation initiatives and the responsible adoption of AI at the workplace.

“The challenge is that AI can unintentionally amplify these biases, quietly and at scale, if organisations are not careful,” she said.

A reliable system starts with good data that a system is trained on, experts said. Meyer said: “AI systems trained on historical data can inherit past preferences and patterns. This could affect recruitment, performance evaluations and career progression decisions.”

Besides good training data sets, there should also be regular bias audits of AI systems before they are used and even while they are being used, said

senior lecturer and senior specialist of teaching and learning at Nanyang Polytechnic's School of Information Technology Koh Noi Sian.

Other safeguards include explainability requirements – “being able to articulate why an AI made a recommendation” – as well as human override mechanisms at every critical decision point and continuous monitoring, Koh said.

All these safeguards still may not make up for specific programming though.

In 2023, the United State's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) took the iTutorGroup – a global education company that primarily offers tutoring services online – to court. It said the iTutorGroup had deliberately programmed its software to automatically reject women aged 55 and older and men 60 and older.

It turns out that iTutorGroup – which is based in China – had applied age limit norms that were common in China, but illegal in the US, among other things. iTutorGroup ended up paying US\$365,000 (S\$473,000) to the 200 or so qualified applicants that had been screened out.

Another example of how AI can hurt employees is through “workplace monitoring AI systems that track employee productivity, behaviour, or emotional states, by analysing communications, screen time or biometric data”, said Koh.

Meyer added that if managers relied too heavily on AI-generated insights, which emphasise measurable outputs, during performance appraisals, this may overlook other areas like “context, collaboration, and leadership behaviours”.



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AI cannot completely replace human judgment

Certis – most visible for its auxiliary police force that escorts cash from ATMs and banks to armed security for major events – has 25,000 employees, across Singapore, Australia and Qatar.

Little wonder then that it uses AI extensively in its human resource practices – whether it is LinkedIn's Hiring Assistant to automate sourcing for candidates 24-7, or building an AI agent to help its staff create job descriptions better.

These tools help it “move faster across high-volume applicant pools”, said its chief HR officer and chief executive of Certis Corporate University Jaclyn Lee.

However, she emphasised that “AI should augment how our people work, not replace the human judgment behind key decisions in how we hire, develop and manage our workforce”. For instance, “where AI supports HR processes, it is a tool to inform decisions, not to make them”.

She added that “no single AI solution fits every context”. “Adapting has meant helping our people understand both the potential and the limits of the tools available to them.”

That idea of supporting, not replacing, human decision-making was something SEEK's head of AI Product Rishi Patil pointed to. SEEK owns popular employment marketplace platform Jobstreet.

“What's on the horizon is not AI replacing people, but AI becoming a decision-support layer that works alongside human judgment and HR expertise... That means the future of hiring should be build around deliberate human-AI collaboration.

“AI should surface structured, explainable insights, while humans remain accountable for the decisions,” he said.

Added Meyer: "Culture, trust and fairness remain fundamentally human responsibilities."

Laws have to catch up too

At the same time, legislation is fast catching up. Already, the European Union's AI Act said that "AI systems used in employment decisions such as covering recruitment, selection, targeted job advertising, candidate evaluation and performance monitoring are classified as high-risk", said Koh.

From Aug 2, 2026, the tools will require things such as risk assessments and technical documentation, among other things, and fines may be meted out – as high as 15 million euros (S\$22.2 million) or 3 per cent of global annual turnover, whichever is higher.

She added that Singapore may adopt more similar standards as more multinational companies spread best practices. "AI used in employment decisions will increasingly be treated as a regulated, high-stakes activity and not just a neutral productivity tool," she said.

South China Morning Post, Small Business Association of Michigan, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, American Civil Liberties Union

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