

Are Brad and Kristen More Likely to Be Hired Than Tyrone and Keisha?

Case Studies in Affirmative Action

When the words “affirmative action” are uttered, many preconceived ideas may come to mind. Some people may think of quotas, others may think of reverse discrimination. Getting past preconceived ideas is one of the biggest challenges in learning about affirmative action. Why is that? Perhaps reluctance to change is difficult because beliefs about affirmative action are often strongly tied to deeply held political and social values. Sometimes it is helpful to look at nontraditional illustrations, presented as case studies, to assist in understanding a concept.

Case Study #1

One of the first case studies referencing affirmative action involves major league baseball. Before 1947, Major League Baseball teams only recruited from one talent pool (i.e., the white pool). The owners had an “unwritten agreement” to recruit only from the white pool. That all changed when Brooklyn Dodgers owner Branch Rickey decided to recruit from another pool – the African American pool. He knew that by concentrating only on one pool – the white pool – he was settling for mediocrity and perhaps missing talent by limiting his recruitment efforts.

The first victim of affirmative action may have been Ed Stevens, a Dodgers baseball player with two years of work experience. He was let go to make room for an African American with no experience at the same level. To many of the players on the Dodgers team that didn’t seem right. In fact, they were so upset that they started a petition to present to management. They argued that the new African American employee would upset the organization’s “chemistry” and drive away customers. Upper management rejected the petition and threatened to fire those who refused to work with the new employee. One of the employees refused and was fired.

So who was this new recruit from the African American pool? His name was Jackie Robinson, one of the greatest baseball players who ever played the game. The Dodgers went on to win the National League Championship in 1947 and recorded the highest attendance in the team’s history. Apparently the customers cared more about a winning team than the racial make-up of the team.

This case study presents a number of lessons we can learn about affirmative action:

- 1) Owner Branch Rickey wanted the most talented players, regardless of where they came from.
- 2) By concentrating only on one pool – the white pool – the Major League Baseball teams were merely filling out the rosters with mediocre and bad players.
- 3) The Dodgers spent money sending scouts into the Negro Leagues to find the most talented players.
- 4) The Dodgers didn’t wait for African American players to knock down the doors and demand equal treatment.
- 5) Robinson was the first, but not the only, good player landed by the Dodgers from the African American pool.

The Dodgers did affirmative action the right way. They weren’t simply filling quotas; they were proactive in recruiting for talent long before government intervention came along. Good affirmative action occurs when

an organization voluntarily examines its staffing practices and realizes that it's missing out on a pool of talent. Then it proactively pursues that talent pool.

Case Study #2

After reading the first case study, some may think that is how things were “back then”. We are more enlightened today and organizations would not exclude talented people because of their gender or race in this century, would they? In fact, some believe that reverse discrimination has occurred resulting in hiring people in certain classes to simply fill quotas regardless of talent or skills. The next case study may refute this notion. In 2001 and 2002, Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan conducted a study to see how applicants are treated simply based on names. Fake resumes were sent in response to entry level job advertisements in Boston and Chicago. The makeup of the 5,000 resumes was as follows:

Description	# of Resumes	Gender	# of Resumes	Naming Convention	# of Resumes
Good fit for the job: Appropriate levels of education and experience	2,500	Female	1,250	Predominately white names	750
				Predominately African-American names	750
		Male	1,250	Predominately white names	750
				Predominately African-American names	750
Poor fit for the job: Lacking appropriate levels of education and experience	2,500	Female	1,250	Predominately white names	750
				Predominately African-American names	750
		Male	1,250	Predominately white names	750
				Predominately African-American names	750

The results were based on the percentage of resumes that received invitations for interviews. When you review the table below, keep in mind the equal distribution of the labor pool as indicated above.

Description	% Receiving Calls Back
Good Fit	9.2%
Bad Fit	7.6%
Female	8.6%
Male	7.7%
White Names	10.10%
African-American Names	6.7%
White Names – Good Fit	11.31%
White Names – Poor Fit	8.8%

African-American Names – Good Fit	6.99%
African-American Names –Poor Fit	6.41%

It seems that even after the turn of the century, discrimination may exist. The following implications can be made from this case study:

- Being a good fit for the job does make a difference
- Females received more interviews than males
- Those with predominately white names received more interviews
- Having a good resume if you have a white name seems to make more of a difference than having an African American name with a good resume

In case you are wondering, other studies have found similar patterns of discrimination. One such study conducted by sociologist Devah Pager sent white and African-American applicants out to apply for 350 entry-level jobs in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin area. Half of the applicants in each race indicated that had been convicted of drug possession. Among the African American applicants with drug convictions, only 5% were offered interviews where 17% of white applicants with drug convictions were offered interviews. More interesting, however, was the fact that among the applicants without drug convictions, only 14% of African Americans were offered interviews compared to 34% among the white applicants.

Based on these case studies, you may come to a conclusion that underutilization might occur because of conscious racism or sexism. This doesn't mean to say that those screening resumes or meeting applicants are necessarily racist. Sometimes the stereotypes are so ingrained that we may *accidentally* discriminate. That is why using numbers is so important to determine if affirmative action is needed. It is important to take a good count and compare that to what is available.

And that, in summary, is what affirmative action is. As demonstrated in the first case study, affirmative action is an attempt by an organization to actively recruit and select talented employees from traditionally under-tapped pools. Affirmative action is, for many employers, not a government mandate that forces organizations to hire unqualified employees or a program just for the sake of diversity.