

Professional Perspective

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# The Job Was a Perfect Fit & I Wasn't Considered

Contributed by [Roberta Young](#), Shook, Hardy & Bacon

Early in my career, I was an experienced program manager and systems engineer at a major defense contractor. After several years, I was ready for a job change. In preparation, I hired a career coach to help update my resume, coach me on interview skills, and research companies.

We found a job posting that was a perfect fit for me—exact technical expertise, years of experience, and size of projects and budgets. I confidently submitted the polished resume. I knew the waiting would be difficult, but I also knew how rare the requested skills and security clearances were.

A day went by, then another, and soon the week was gone. I checked the job again and was surprised to see the posting was repeated, along with the new phrase, “Urgent Need.” I called my coach and asked for her advice. I will never forget what she suggested, “I want you to make one change to your resume, and only that change. I hoped it wouldn't be necessary, but it appears it is.” I made the change and resubmitted. A few hours later, I had a call for an interview, and within a week, I had the job.

My coach's advice wasn't a resume secret, and looking back, I see the wisdom in it. What was that advice? Simple, but so hard to hear: “Take your name off your resume and list only your initials and last name.” Roberta Young didn't look like a seasoned program manager and systems engineer, but R.A. Young sure did. The recruiter gave it away in the initial call asking me to interview: “I didn't expect you to be a woman.” My response: “I hope that's not a deal breaker.” I never forgot that lesson as I tackled my dream of becoming a patent attorney, but I certainly hoped that things would change.

Unfortunately, however, things have not changed. I've faced similar situations as an attorney. With frustration and disappointment, I still wonder why, despite all of the aspirational goals, carefully worded mission statements, conferences, and initiatives, there is little improvement in equality for women and minorities in law firms.

How do we “move the needle” and become aware of how unconscious or conscious bias is blocking sufficient hiring and retention of women and diverse candidates?

## Filter Out Gender & Ethnicity

My career coach made a good point—we make assumptions about someone upon reading or hearing their name. With the rise of social media, it's harder to use only initials, but it can still be done. Firms and companies can use hiring intake software to assign applicants numbers in place of names, before resumes are routed to hiring managers or partners. Other potential identifying associations, avocations, or organizations could also be removed.

If a firm takes the initial impression a name makes off the table, it will no longer be clouded with bias, but instead focused on filling the needs of the company. The goal is to have the applicant's skills take center stage with no preconceived ideas interfering with the assessment. Recruiters may only review a candidate's application for a few seconds, so that first impression is more crucial than ever.

## Apply Identical Assessments

I recently joined a new firm and am thrilled to see a diverse group of attorneys, including more women—especially in patent law—than I've ever worked with. Beginning with the hiring process, I experienced the difference. I was given an assessment test and one hour to complete it. That test guided our discussion in the initial interview and led to a more in-depth and genuine discussion of approaches to patent application drafting and prosecution than I experienced in other interviews. For the first time, I knew every candidate was given the same test and asked the same types of questions. Sadly, that has not been the case with other interviews.

## Use Metrics

All too often a firm's DEI mission statement sounds great but doesn't really describe what success is, in terms of numbers. Only by tracking and measuring will enough data be gathered to see if the measures taken are increasing the number of women and other diverse candidates being interviewed and hired.

In addition to recruitment, firms should track new attorney and partner collaboration. One key success factor for new associates and laterals is to work with as many partners in the firm as possible. This may require seeking out assignments with key partners. However, partners should also be reviewed based on the number of associates or counsel with whom they work throughout the year. Studies show that women and minority attorneys often work with very few partners and have little opportunity to work with the stars of the firm. This metric can be measured on both partner and associate reviews.

## Monitor the Communication Process

Language used to describe lawyers can be reflective of bias. For example: He's confident and assertive; she's compassionate and well-liked. Tracking attributes can reveal where inclusion efforts need to be supported. Analyzing internal reviews for language nuances may highlight bias, if present. If women are rated on "likeability" and men on "assertiveness" the problem becomes painfully apparent.

## Long Way Left to Go

I watched with great interest as a number of Big Law firms opened offices in my hometown. I thought change was coming. Sadly, I was wrong. One firm's new office includes all white, male attorneys with the exception of one judge who left for private practice. At another firm, every attorney had at least one degree from the same university as the partner establishing the office. I know there are highly qualified women and diverse attorneys with the highly sought-after experience required, yet none were hired. It is human nature to trust the familiar and nothing is more familiar than ourselves. However, this "cloning factor" remains a significant problem when most attorneys at the highest levels are white men. Firm growth and success will only occur when people recognize this and push beyond comfort zones.

While clients are demanding diversity from their firms and penalizing them when representation goals are not met, there is still much substantive work to do and we need measurable concepts to see where change is or is not occurring. It takes thoughtfulness, training, and a willingness to do things differently to address these issues. However, the rewards are higher for those firms and companies who promote and achieve a truly diverse, inclusive, and equitable workplace.