"Culture Fit" as "Anti-Diversity": Avoiding Human Resources Decisions that Disadvantage the Brightest

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Editorial

A Story Worth Telling

I have just had a chat with a good friend who recently completed her on-campus interview in a small liberal arts college library. With a brilliant education from one of the top-ranked ALA-accredited schools, a knowledge of multiple languages, international work experience, and a solid publication record, she felt that she had a fair shot at this position. The hiring decision, however, was negative; a formal response claimed the usual—someone else was a better "fit." When she queried the library website a while later, she discovered that the person hired was a younger man with a fraction of her education and experience who, unlike her, did not belong to a visible or religious minority and was from the geographic area in question. We will never know for sure what this lack of fit exactly meant in this case. It did not seem like a bona fide lack of fit with the actual position requirements or the library's declared values. Much more likely, it was the proverbial "culture fit" that is so difficult to detect and define but that often serves as a crutch for justifying biased (non)hiring decisions, irrespective of whether bias is overt or implicit/unconscious. In this case, fit could have implicitly referred to so-called surface-level diversity characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, religion, gender, country of origin) or deep-level diversity characteristics (e.g., a worldview and opinions that do not align with the expected and the mainstream; personality traits; a life experience different from that in a well-to-do East Coast state; in professional terms, a different—much more acute—appreciation for the issues of censorship, intellectual freedom, freedom of expression, access, and collegiality in a small interdependent library team). In this case, the culture fit argument has cost this library the great potential, energy, and revitalization usually associated with multiple layers of diversity in a newly hired librarian. The diversity cost was tied into both surface- and deep-level diversity characteristics. The latter is frequently referred to as values-based diversity.

It is values-based diversity that is often threatened and attacked by the elusive weapon of culture fit, and it is values-based diversity that is the focus of this editorial. Of course, demographic diversity characteristics may become grounds for discrimination and inequality that results from biased attitudes and prejudiced behaviors. For example, researchers from a Harvard-led team that investigated implicit bias "found that the highest levels of bias—70 percent or more—were directed at blacks, the elderly, the disabled, the overweight and other stigmatized groups.

Furthermore, minorities internalized the same biases as majority groups" (Babcock, 2006, para. 5). Not dismissing the biases related to observable diversity characteristics, this editorial delves into the less conspicuous and just as significant aspect of diversity—the values-based one.

Sorting Terminology Out

The concept of *values-based diversity* is gaining prominence in our field, which has traditionally been "focused on increasing the number of underrepresented populations among our ranks" (Hudson-Ward, 2014, para. 1). Today, however, we seek "more than visual representations of diversity as proof that an employer offers an inclusive environment" and wish to account for "the totality of an individual's diverse contributions and lifestyle choices" that can "matter as much as demographic differences" (Hudson-Ward, 2014, para. 1). Values-based diversity certainly includes consideration of "visible characteristics and demographics"; however, it also includes "diversity in thought, diversity in approach, and diversity in ideas"; differences in communication styles and types of motivational factors at the workplace; generational differences; and cultural heritage, to name just a few (Hudson-Ward, 2014, para. 3-4).

Values-based diversity often ties into so-called *deep-level diversity* characteristics—ones that are not easily observable but come out in the course of interactions, collaboration, social and work-related activities, learning processes, and so on. A related and somewhat overlapping concept is *acquired diversity* "(e.g., cultural competence and fluency)," which can also encompass one's worldview and work or communication styles (Hudson-Ward, 2014, para. 10). One concept we are most familiar with is *demographic* or *inherent diversity*, also referred to as *surface-level diversity* (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation, body ability, heritage language, religion, and so on) (Hudson-Ward, 2014, para. 13). An appreciation of the importance of deep-level and values-based diversity is particularly important in counteracting the misguided application of the culture fit argument in human resource management decisions and its detrimental effect on the state of diversity and inclusion in our workplaces and higher education.

The Sneakiness of the Culture Fit and Its Anti-Diversity Stance

The story which gave impetus to this piece is not unique, of course. Culture fit is used time and time again in hiring and promotional decisions in not-for-profit settings (libraries, archives, museums) and academia, not only in industry, and even the most diversity-conscious organizations and departments "still use this term without fully understanding its implications" and strive to hire people for culture fit (She Geeks Out, 2018, para. 1).

As though it were an unequivocally good thing.

It is not.

And even if an organization defines its culture as "inclusive, warm, welcoming, fun, and hard working," we have to be inquisitive and critical about what these designators mean (She Geeks Out, 2018, para. 1). Such words as inclusive, warm, and welcoming may serve as euphemisms to disguise a culture of groupthink whereby "alternative viewpoints might not be valued" (She Geeks Out, 2018, para. 2). Masquerading as a great organizational culture, there might be an environment that shuns those who see the world differently, seek change, have a critical eye, and not only notice things that require attention but also dare name these things out loud; those who push the envelope and disrupt the established order; or simply those who stand out: the quickest thinkers, the most brilliant writers, the best presenters, the most highly educated, the

bravest, the most experienced—in short, those who will make the average and the complacent look bad. Or will make them work harder to measure up to a new standard of excellence.

As a result, culture fit—an offshoot of unconscious bias and the desire to work with people like us—"is far more common [as a reason] not to hire someone" than a reason for hiring (Wharton School, 2015). Rarely will it be explained "what aspect of the [organizational] culture" strikes discord with the new candidate, (Wharton School, 2015, para. 3) and the hiring decision will then rest on emotive personal impressions and the likeability of the candidate. The latter is usually determined in the course of social interactions embedded in the interview process and/or casual chats. Filtering out the undesirables is not limited to hiring and also affects retention. Psychologist Benjamin Schneider, through the Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA) framework, proposed that "[l]ike-minded individuals select each other to be part of an organization, and sooner or later, the 'misfits' leave" (Wharton School, 2015, para. 11).

Of course, there is always a degree of correlation between the diversity of life experiences and worldviews and the diversity of demographic characteristics. However, the working ethos of culture fit can create a situation whereby a team will be diverse demographically and representative of different social groups (by gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and body ability) while remaining homogeneous in terms of cognitive thinking, working styles, social class, ethical approaches, and international orientation. For example, organizations and university departments, which make an effort to reduce longstanding inequalities and discrimination and the exclusion of traditionally marginalized groups, can create an environment whereby all team members have fair access to "resources and opportunities like coaching, developmental opportunities, high-visibility projects, [and] leadership roles," and whereby "pay and other perks are fairly distributed" (Nishii, 2018). Fair access will likely blur the intergroup boundaries to some extent but will not make the team less vulnerable to groupthink and the subsequent exclusion of people on the grounds of values-based diversity. That is to say, even such places as university departments, libraries, museums, and archives are not immune to the misuse of culture fit and the subsequent lack of intellectual heterogeneity.

The team spirit at the workplace is incredibly important, and a high level of consensus on the foundational values certainly keeps the team together. However, it also bears the hidden danger of homogenizing the team intellectually and preventing openness and evolution. Heterogeneity at the workplace is not only about new ideas and creative influx. It is also an antidote to complacency, groupthink, intellectual stagnation, and unfair workplace practices. These negative phenomena may be easily overlooked in a team of think-alikes. Heterogeneity encourages a more careful processing of information; "[s]ocial awkwardness" introduced by "'socially distinct newcomers and the social concerns their presence stimulates among old-timers motivates behaviour that can convert affective pains into cognitive gains—or, in other words, better group problem solving" (Wharton School, 2015, para. 19, citing Phillips, Liljenquist, & Neale, 2008) and healthier workplace dynamics. Although, in some situations, "similar people work better together," for "jobs involving complex decisions and creativity, more diverse teams outperform less diverse ones. Too much similarity can lead to teams that are overconfident, ignore vital information and make poor (or even unethical) decisions" (Rivera, 2015, p. 11).

Culture Fit as Social Fit

That is to say, defined as the like-mindedness of colleagues, culture fit is antithetical to diversity. While it may or may not conflict with demographic diversity, it often does conflict with values-

based diversity manifestations. Looking to hire a "culturally fit" individual, employers, wittingly or unwittingly, perpetuate the workplace status quo.

That being said, we cannot ignore the fact that a new team member should feel comfortable and included in a new setting. So, some degree of compatibility between the person and the new workplace is obviously necessary. Is it a culture fit or something else?

It is definitely not a "social fit." When culture and social fit are conflated, the former shifts "from systematic analysis of who will thrive in a given workplace to snap judgment" about with whom the current team members would "rather hang out" (Rivera, 2015, para. 2). From the intended fit with the job requirements and organizational values, the concept morphs into considerations of personal fit (Rivera, 2015), and hiring "based on personal fit can keep demographic and cultural diversity low" (Rivera, 2015, para. 10). For example, several leaders of Google, a company known for their successful talent attraction, are confident that

> You must work with people you don't like, because a workforce comprised of people who are all "best office buddies" can be homogeneous, and homogeneity in an organization breeds failure. A multiplicity of viewpoints—aka diversity—is your best defense against myopia (p. 107) [...]. These differences of perspective generate insights that can't be taught (pp. 107-108) [...]. Great talent often doesn't look and act like you (Schmidt, Rosenberg, & Eagle, 2014, p. 108).

Google's professed approach to hiring may be an exception, though, because, as Rivera (2015) claims, "[s]electing new employees based on personal similarities is by no means unique to banking, consulting or law; it has become a common feature of [North] American corporate culture" (para. 9). However, not-for-profits and academia are not immune to these missteps either, and it is particularly disheartening when these practices are noticed in the departments and professional settings that pride themselves on leading the way in diversity and inclusion efforts in LIS.

This fallacy of social fit as a criterion for hiring pretty much sends the merit of social lunches or dinners and informal interactions (factored into hiring decisions) out the window. It is very "easy to mistake rapport for skill" (Rivera, 2015, para. 13) and to forget that the candidate's potential is not about "hobbies, hometowns and biographies" that match those of potential employers and colleagues (Rivera, 2015, para. 8). As Condon (2017) rightly notes, a workplace is "not a fraternity or social club," and it is "certainly not a family. You don't performance-manage out family members and you rarely do so to your friends, but you need to be able to do that at work" (para. 5). This does not mean that we cannot find friends at work. This does mean, however, that we do not hire a new person to fit ourselves; we hire them to fit the values, mission, and work content of our departments and organizations. How should we go about it?

Value Fit and Culture Add

We can certainly take steps—and time—to clearly define culture fit in measurable and unambiguous terms. Instead of impressionistic phrases, we can use the guidance of job requirements and organizational values as a baseline for determining compatibility. Management literature refers to it as 'value fit,' i.e., the degree to which people "embody and share" core organizational values (She Geeks Out, 2018, para. 3). There are no longer "great guys" or "folks nice to have a chat with"; there are those who relate to current team members by virtue of shared "respect, empathy, accountability, transparency, integrity, and passion" (She Geeks Out,

2018, para. 3). They may bring a different flavor and interpretation to these terms, expanding and enriching them; thus, they "create a culture add" for the new workplace (She Geeks Out, 2018, para. 3). This is a much more reliable test and predictor of future adjustment than the famous "airport test" (i.e., "who would you not mind being stuck at the airport with?"). Condon (2017) strongly advises that interviewers "aim for 'core value' fit, and if you'd be okay getting stuck in an airport with them, that's a bonus" (para. 6). Although "eliminating culture fit from your vocabulary and processes might end up meaning that it takes more time to find the right person, […] finding someone who is a great culture add and values fit could be exactly what" a university department or a professional setting "needs to grow" (She Geeks Out, 2015, para. 5).

Building the Value Fit and Culture Add into the Interview Process

Panel interviewing or interviewing done by multiple team members independently have been proposed almost unanimously as a way to avoid defining culture fit as social fit and, to the extent possible, to reduce unconscious bias in hiring. Reduce, but not eliminate completely. Seeing that "we all gravitate toward people we consider to be similar to us, even the most scrupulously fair hiring managers tend to think more favourably of people who remind them of themselves. The result is an uneven process that limits diversity and fails to secure the best talent" (Rock & Smith, 2018, para. 3).

Becoming aware of cultural and personal biases and their effect on the types of questions asked during the interview would be the first step. Another step would be having a structured rather than free-floating interview, which is something implemented today in many information science settings and academia. However, even this strategy is not foolproof. In fluid, complex settings, in creative, interdependent research teams, wherein people are bound by multiple shared projects and responsibilities, it is very hard sometimes to achieve entirely autonomous judgements and opinions, especially if you factor in the hierarchical and power relationships among committee members: supervisors and supervisees; mentors and mentees; tenured and tenure-track faculty; students and faculty. This further complicates the picture and, behind the façade of structured interviewing and panel approaches, decisions may also be biased or skewed. Moreover, structured interviewing usually provides guidance on what data to collect and how to collect them but not on how to weigh, interpret, or validly compare the data gathered about different candidates or how significant the fit component should be vis-à-vis other evaluative criteria (Rivera, 2015, para. 16).

Rivera (2015) writes that "in many organizations, fit has gone rogue" (para. 2). This applies to not-for-profit and academic settings, too. Having specific and rigorous documentation, however, can help with keeping committee members on track if they do veer off into discussing candidates in impressionistic and subjective terms.

Types of Documents that Can be Used to Guide Hiring and Promotion Committees

So, what documents could be helpful to keep decision makers on track?

One could be *A Checklist of Phrases and Qualifiers to Avoid* in verbal discussions and written reports reflecting on the candidate because they are an indication of unconscious bias:

- "We did not have a good feeling about this person."
- "She did not seem like a good fit with the department."

- "We did not think they would be all that good as part of the team."
- "They did not appear to be the team player we were looking for."
- "He is such a great guy to spend time with!"
- "I talked to her and knew right away she was a match!"
- "They are a true team player!"
- "They have a positive attitude that will help them fit in!"
- "I like her a lot. She will be very compatible with the rest of the team."

And other phrases similar to those. Or similarly motivated. The leadership consulting company GapJumpers also reinforces the need to eliminate "subjective junk (like passionate and team player)" from the hiring language (Rockwood, n.d., para. 3). By the way, Google leaders also claim that "truly passionate people don't often use the 'P-word'" (Schmidt, Rosenberg, & Eagle, 2014, p. 100); passion shows naturally in what they do and how they discuss it; no need to call it.

Another document could be a clearly articulated list of *Organizational Values and Mission Goals*, which accurately define your organizational culture and can, in fact, signify the true culture fit. Proof for all of the below can be found through specific, example-based interview questions and the candidates' record based on their submitted portfolios.

- Orientation toward collaboration
- Skills to work in a team
- Independent and creative decision-making
- Ethical decision-making
- Detail- or result-orientation
- Growth mindset
- Commitment to diversity and inclusion
- Focus on people
- Productivity
- Ways of dealing with failure, stress, and strong emotions
- Strategic and holistic vision
- Planning skills
- Ability to execute and deliver
- Flexibility, adaptability, and agility
- Value of service and public engagement
- Fairness
- Teaching skills

By the same token, it is useful to create a bulleted list of core job requirements and have it as a checklist, not as a narrative paragraph, in front of the committee in the course of discussion and decision-making. It goes without saying that it is impossible to eliminate unconscious bias completely. Moreover, if there is a basic lack of integrity to the hiring process, if the successful candidate is determined from the get-go, and if the whole process is just a sham, then no documentation and self-awareness exercises will help. However, for the most part, this is not the case, and most hiring committees are genuinely motivated to improve their processes and to reduce bias. They could start by exploring the true meaning of their organizational culture, so

that no great candidates are erroneously eliminated as cultural misfits, and so that diversity does not suffer in the process.

I have chosen to dedicate my editorial to organizational culture for a reason this time. The entire issue, edited by Dr. Bharat Mehra, is about diversity and inclusion in specific information and cultural organizations. This time, the grand tour of the issue is in his capable hands.

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