<u>How can we put the "human" back into the recruiting process?</u>

<u>Introduction</u>

What does it mean to be human? In the English language, the word "human" overlaps with the word "humane". The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines the word "humane" as "having or showing compassion or benevolence"[1]. It is interesting that the OED uses the word "compassion" because to show compassion strikes at the heart of our humanity. To be able to show compassion means to understand what it is like to be someone else; as it were, to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. If we are unable to show compassion, we are no longer human.

This view has a long history of support. The Old Testament in Sacred Scripture speaks of showing compassion. In Deuteronomy, it is noteworthy that the Israelites are reminded to show compassion on foreigners, with the reminder that they themselves were slaves in Egypt. This theme is carried on in the New Testament, which Christ upholds as the greatest of all the Ten Commandments, and which is still known in our day as the rightly-named "Golden Rule": that we ought to love others as we love ourselves. This theme persists into the medieval period, with the great thinker Peter Lombard, the *Magister Sententiarum*, going as far as to say that when we love God and our neighbour we immerse ourselves into the life of the Trinity.

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[1] Oxford Dictionaries | English. (n.d.). humane | Definition of humane in English by Oxford Dictionaries. [online] Available at: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/humane [Accessed 24 Jun. 2018].

Yet one would be mistaken in thinking that this worldview was only posited by religious thinkers. Even with the advent of the Enlightenment, we see the same theme continue. The 18th century German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte proposed in his *Wissenschaftslehre* that showing empathy was fundamental to our consciousness. His intellectual descendent Arthur Schopenhauer made compassion the foundation of his ethical system – indeed, he argued that the ethical systems proposed by earlier thinkers such as Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas and even Immanuel Kant were flawed in that they left out the role of compassion, of immersing ourselves in the experience of someone else. The Scottish forefather of economics, Adam Smith, began his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* with the observation that even the most selfish person is interested in the welfare of others and that "the greatest ruffian, the most hardened criminal, has something of [compassion]"[2]. He went on to observe that we do not have any immediate experience of what others feel, and because of this, we attempt to bring the experiences of others to ourselves by thinking "what we would feel if we were in his situation"[3].

Clearly, what underlies the historical view of compassion and ultimately humanity is one of reciprocity: I attempt to bring your feelings to myself in order to understand your experience and to have compassion on what it is you are feeling. In the German language, this is made explicit: the word *Mitfühlend* translated literally means "with-feelings" in the English language.

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[2] Smith, A. and Stewart, D. (1861). The theory of moral sentiments, or, An essay towards an analysis of the principles by which men naturally judge concerning the conduct and character, first of their neighbours, and afterwards of themselves, to which is added a dissertation on the origin of languages. London: Henry G. Bohn.
[3] *Ibid.*

One problem with technology, and artificial intelligence subsequently, is the potential to create a disconnect between people such that whatever humanity we did exhibit is extinguished altogether. There are many instances in which this arises, from trolling to cyberbullying to catfishing, though this paper seeks to examine the labour market.

The labour market comprises businesses and workers and those who are looking for work. Some would also add that there are "fringe" entities, such as unions, activist groups and governmental agencies. Whilst many have warned that the potential impact of artificial intelligence on the labour market is a huge increase in the unemployment rate, what has seldom been discussed is how artificial intelligence has *already* made the recruiting process more inhumane. Lack of responses, opaque criteria, frustrating application experiences, and more, all blight the recruitment scene. It has been well-documented that searching for a job leads to frustration, anger and depression. But instead of companies taking on the task of making the recruitment process more convenient and easy, they burden jobseekers with additional obstacles. This has been aided, sadly, with the help of technologies such as Applicant Tracking Systems.

It is my contention, and something that I am currently working on at the moment, that even though technology has been the cause of the problem it can also be the source of a solution.

What is an Application Tracking System and why are they bad for labour markets?

Companies use artificial intelligence in the recruiting process with what is called "Application Tracking Systems" or "ATS" for short. These systems use algorithms - sets of instructions for computers to follow - to determine the suitability of a candidate for a position. This means that if you send an application for a job, chances are it is not a human at the other end who is reading your application, but a machine. As the BBC rightly ask: "If you take the time to fill in a job application, you might think someone would at least have the courtesy to actually look at it."[4] Sadly, this is not the case. This is inhumane because, following from reciprocity, one would expect that if they are willing to devote considerable effort to their application, companies should devote just as much attention to their applicants. Companies begin with questions such as, "Why do you want to work for *us*", almost as if to elicit loyalty from the outset from applicants who have not even been given a job offer yet but they seldom treat their applicants as they should be for the loyalty they expect. The entire relationship between the applicant and the company is disproportionate and lopsided entirely to the company.

 Furthermore, each person is no longer seen as a human being, but rather as a mere collation of "keywords" for a computer to scan. Indeed, an emerging advice in recruiting to jobhunters is to fill their CVs with the right "keywords" and to use the right format for the computer to scan. This reduces job applicants to mere objects despite the fact that human beings are greater than the sum of their parts.

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[4] Miller, M. (2012). Beating the recruitment machines. [online] BBC News. Available at: https://bbc.co.uk/news/business-20255387 [Accessed 24 Jun. 2018].

The German-born political scientist Hannah Arendt is famous for her 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. In this book, Arendt pondered how exactly individuals in Nazi Germany could systematically kill Jews and other groups without any sign of remorse and focused her attention on the person of Adolf Eichmann, the regime's lieutenant colonel responsible for the Holocaust. What shocked Arendt was that this was made possible by the lack of ability to actually "think" on the part of Eichmann, and to engage in blind obedience to the Führer such that acts of genocide became commonplace. In her words, they became "banal": "What had become banal was the attack on thinking, and this itself, for her, was devastating and consequential"[5].

With the rise of artificial intelligence, humanity is once again confronted with the possibility of discarding human reason altogether. In the labour market with ATS, the consequences of this are all too real. There has been an emergence of what we call a "Computer Says No" mentality, wherein applicants are rejected by human resources departments simply because the ATS has said that they will not be a good fit for potentially frivolous reasons. With ATS, theoretically, a candidate could be rejected for a supposed "mistake" as not using double-spacing on their CV. But this is frivolous, because a candidate should be judged on the basis of how good they are likely to be in the job, not on how good they are in moulding a CV to comply with the ATS. It is for human resources departments to challenge such decisions, but they don't, and instead go along with what the ATS has told them. They become non-thinking, and as we saw with Eichmann, the consequences of this are

[5] Butler, J. (2011). Hannah Arendt's challenge to Adolf Eichmann. [online] the Guardian. Available at: https://theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/29/hannah-arendt-adolf-eichmann-banality-of-evil [Accessed 24 Jun. 2018].

devastating. It is not surprising with this adoption of ATS that applicants are no longer seen as potential assets for a company but as "inconveniences"; the ability for recruiters to empathise with applicants has long gone. Indeed, the name "human resources" speaks for itself – workers are seen as resources to be "used up" and disposed of on a whim – whereas in the past in the English-speaking world they were known as the "personnel department".

But it would not be true to say that this non-thinkingness (if I may be so bold to invent a word) has only affected human resources departments. Sadly, its delirious effects has spread to other sectors such as universities, where this practice is simply accepted as a norm rather than actively challenged.

A key quality we value in the modern world is transparency. Thus, the legislative process in many jurisdictions is now open for the public to view – it was once the case here in England that visitors, traditionally called "strangers", could not see debates occurring in the House of Commons – and there has been a drive to make the judicial system increasingly transparent, as one sees in the United States where court cases are typically recorded and/or transcribed. Despite this high value we place on transparency, how applicants are chosen with ATS remains shrouded in secrecy.

In any competition, and an application for a job is in effect engagement in a competition, the winner is made public and the criteria is known to all[6]. Thus, Usain Bolt won the 100m at the Olympics by being the first to cross the line. The criteria is understood by everyone and the game itself retains its credibility. The secrecy of how ATS selects candidates makes the job selection process lack credibility. How do I know I didn't get the job because I was not related to the boss, or because I didn't go to the "right school", or my name is foreign-sounding? These questions remain unanswered insofar the algorithms underpinning ATS are secret.

This leads us on to the issue of what some have called "algorithmic bias", whereby the use of these algorithms can exacerbate already existing inequalities in society. Take two candidates: one went to Eton and one is an actual refugee from Syria. Let us suppose a job is determined by the grade attained at school, and the job stipulates a successful candidate needs an "A". The candidate who went to Eton achieved an "A" in the comfort of being surrounded by future world leaders whilst the refugee from Syria who fled from the jaws of terrorism and famine achieved a "B" after doing an exam in a school that was shelled. Who would you pick? Most rational and *compassionate* people would pick the second candidate despite the stated requirement because of *context* – the second candidate achieved a grade below that of his rival candidate despite all the setbacks and would probably do better if he were placed in similar surroundings - but an ATS system would choose the first candidate since computers lack the ability to discern context. Multiply this across hundreds of

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[6] Indeed, such is the strength of this belief in some places around the world such as some counties and states in the United States, those who win the lottery are mandated by law to be made public. The simple reason for this is to let others know that the competition is genuine and that ordinary people can and do win the lottery. Such is this desire to maintain the credibility of the lottery that we saw in New Hampshire that even though the winner of the Powerball wanted anonymity, the prize administrators did not grant her this wish. The court case continues.

jobs, and one sees how the second candidate faces greater inequalities simply because of contextual factors outside of his control.

Lastly, ATS has contributed to a "purple squirrel" syndrome among employers, wherein they set unreasonable requirements for job applicants. It has become a "meme" on the internet to note that employers now want someone who has "5 years of experience, 6 Olympic gold medals and superpowers" or "someone aged 22-26 with 30 years of experience". Ironically, it is often the case that if the employer judged him/herself by the requirement set, he/she would be out of a job. ATS ignores the complexity of human lives and that close to no one has a straightforward life. We can learn from the World Cup at the moment. As I write, Italy and the Netherlands – both great teams – failed to qualify for the World Cup. Argentina and Germany run the risk of exiting altogether. We all know them as great teams but if they were job applicants, ATS would automatically screen them out because of this one failure[7].

How can we empower job applicants in a world of ATS?

Most people around the world are in agreement that in any human relationship, it is the party who is most vulnerable who should be most protected. Hence comes the popular expression that, "we judge a society on the basis of how it treats its weakest members". Between the employer and the jobseeker, it is clearly obvious that the jobseeker is the more vulnerable party. Despite this, employers treat job applicants

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[7] Or to use another example that others have noted in the form of a meme, Donald Trump became President of the United States with no political experience, yet entry-level jobs stipulate they want candidates with 3-5 years work experience.

without any dignity with the help of their ATS. Survey data consistently show applicants despise ATS.

Although ATS has been aided by artificial intelligence, to the detriment of jobseekers, I believe with the help of artificial intelligence the recruitment process can be reformed so that the inherent dignity of those looking for work is preserved. I am building a ratings website that will allow those looking for work to rate the application process of the companies they apply to. Jobhunters will be asked the following questions which they can rate companies on:

- Do you believe the application process was fair?
- How satisfied are you with the feedback you received, if any?
- Were the assignments requested relevant to the position?
- How satisfied are you with the speed of the application process?

The website takes the ratings and then uses machine learning – a technique that can find patterns in data – and then uses this to recommend a job worth applying to for the person. For instance, a person who is in need of a job quickly would be shown jobs with a quick application process.

But what isn't important here is how the website works – understandably, for commercial reasons, not everything can be divulged – but the impact it has on the

labour market. Such a website imposes a penalty on companies with bad application processes and rewards companies with better application process. In some respects, it functions like TripAdvisor in the hotel industry.

Furthermore, it empowers jobhunters. It is often the case with persecution – and I would describe the treatment of jobhunters today as a form of persecution – that one feels they have no outlet to voice their frustration or concerns. The website offers the ability to vent their frustration and in the process alleviate any potential sadness or anger that might come with searching for a job.

My story

I am from the United Kingdom and my ethnicity is black. I often heard stories of how people from ethnic minority backgrounds would apply to open positions with their actual name but would not gain much success, only to apply to a position with their name changed to a more "white-sounding" name and meet instant success. I was originally sceptical of these stories until I, too, was also a victim of institutional racism.

Having lost my job without reason by a line manager of questionable morals in the summer of 2017, I was thrust back into the world of searching for a job. I remember applying to many positions, passing the exams and doing well at the interviews only to receive spurious feedback (if I received feedback at all) that I was rejected because I "lacked experience". In the majority of cases, this was an untrue claim – I

did have experience in that particular sector – but what amazed me was that on deeper investigation through browsing Google and LinkedIn, the person ultimately chosen for the position was both white and often had just as much experience as I did. Much introspection led me to concede that race was ultimately the deciding factor.

It is not a thought one enjoys to entertain, and even as I write this, I often try to "explain it away" thinking and hoping that people can't be so cruel. But they are[8], and such cruelty is rife in the workplace[9]. I felt subhuman and questioned my self-worth. It really eats you up inside.

Despite the fact that studies show that people from white backgrounds earn £67-£209 more a week than those who are black even when controlling for variables such as education[10], virtually every company continues to boast that: "We are an equal opportunities employer". But the two are clearly mutually exclusive. Such discrepancy would not exist if they were indeed an "equal opportunities employer". What we see in the labour market is how companies *shape* discourse; indeed, it is often the case that if you want to know who has power in society, find out who influences the language[11]. Companies shape discourse by insisting that they are not

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[8] Economists such as Gary Becker and Edmund Phelps recognise this in their works.

[9] Wight, A. (2018). Can we be bothered? How racism persists in the workplace. [online] Personnel Today. Available at: https://personneltoday.com/hr/modern-racism-binna-kandola-book-danger-of-indifference/ [Accessed 24 Jun. 2018].

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] This can be gleaned from the writings of the 20th century political theorists Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault.

racist, contrary to what the data says, and victims of racism have an inferior position in sharing their own experience. My proposed website seeks to change that.

One of the saddest consequences from facing such discrimination is to walk away thinking, "all white people are racist". Indeed, I lost the ability to trust other people from my experience and I suspect I will have such cautiousness for a very long time. But not all white people are racist, in fact, often the reverse and the goodness of such people in many ways blots out the evil done by those of the same race. Such goodness deserves to be recognised and the website does just that by filtering companies that have unfair application processes and directing applicants to application processes that are fairer. After all, as any good economist will tell you, searching for a job incurs a cost. I don't want to waste my time applying to a place that will probably discount me on the basis of race.

Conclusion

We often speak of the impact of artificial intelligence on the labour market as a *future* event, usually in the form of increased unemployment. I believe artificial intelligence is already affecting the labour market *today*, but not in the way many have noticed: recruitment processes have become more inhumane, lacking in any compassion or understanding. Fortunately, there are those of us who have noticed, and are working on private sector initiatives to address this.

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