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Bridging the AI Hiring Perception Gap: Bias, Mistrust, and the Road to Opportunity

VONQ VIEW

Introduction

As AI has become more integrated into the hiring process, concerns about bias have grown. Reports of AI-driven tools exhibiting discriminatory behavior based on gender, age, or race have sparked fears that AI hiring may not be entirely safe or fair.

However, upon closer investigation it becomes clear that when used carefully, responsibly and with a candidate-centred approach at the core; AI tools can in fact not only be fair in the way they participate in the hiring process, but they can actually be fairer than humans.

In this sense, contrary to much of the hysteria about bias in how AI is used in recruitment, AI actually has the potential to solve a bias problem that has been prevalent in how humans hire for decades.

Agenda

AI hiring is on the rise

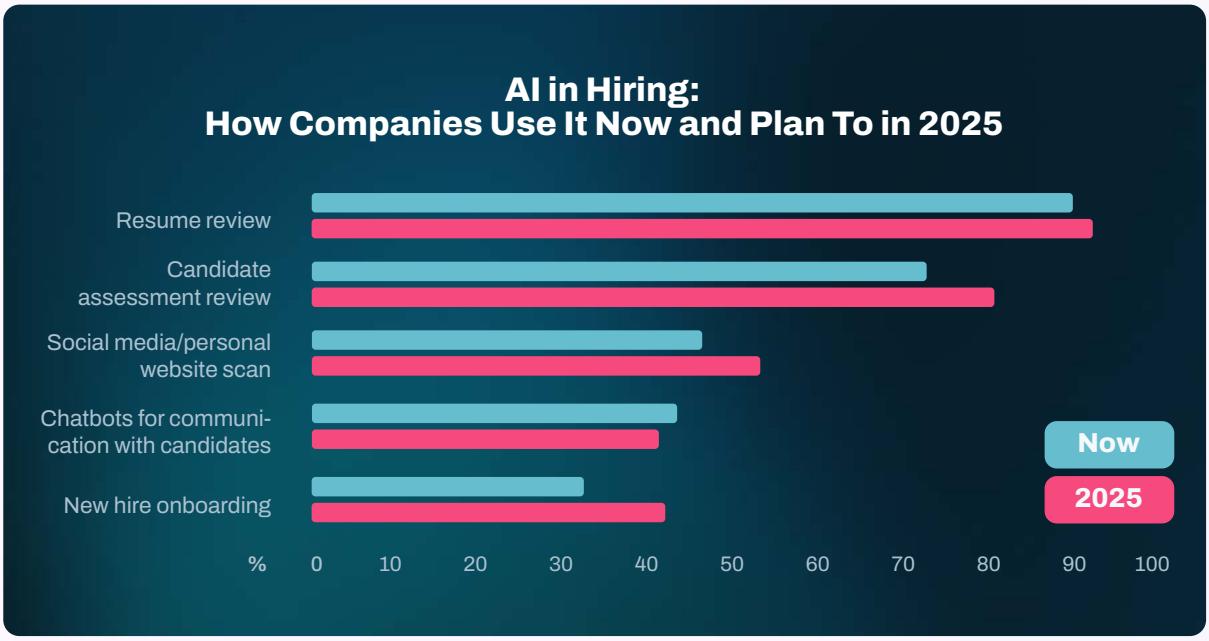
The hiring process has come under unprecedented pressure in the years since the global pandemic. According to research by the World Economic Forum[1], Goldman Sachs received 315,126 applications for its 2024 internship. The same year, Google received over 3 million applications, and McKinsey got more than 1 million.

So it is no wonder that AI has found a role in assisting employers and recruitment agencies to triage the job-seeking queue to varying degrees, right up to and including conducting interviews and scoring candidates.
In fact a survey of 1,000 talent acquisition professionals by LinkedIn[2] found that 37% of organisations are now either experimenting or "actively integrating" Ai into their hiring processes, up from 27% in 2024.
According to a survey by Resumer Builder[3], as many as 68% of companies intend to use AI in hiring decisions in 2025. The survey found that only 0.2% use zero AI in their hiring process.

40%
employ AI chatbots to communicate with candidates

23%
use AI to conduct interviews

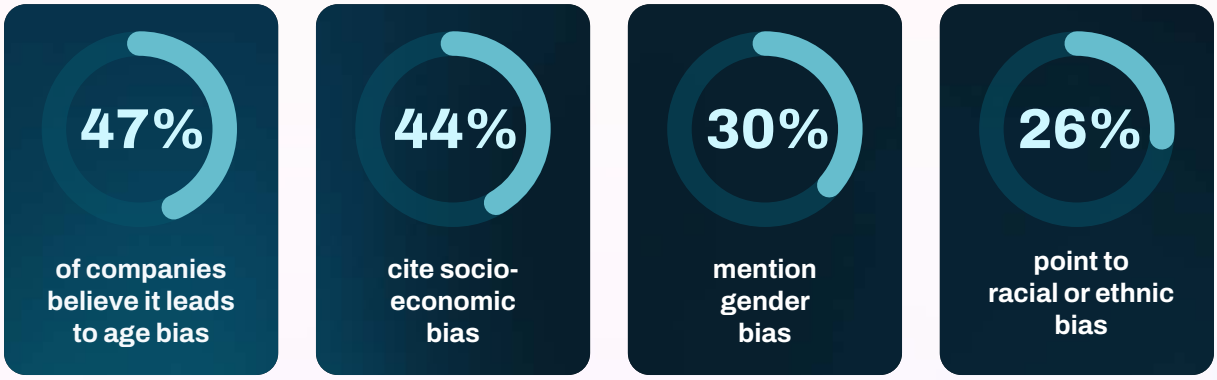
64%
apply AI to review candidate assessments



Moving beyond some of the simple tasks, 24% of companies use AI to conduct the entire interview process, and this figure is expected to rise to 29% by 2025. According to LinkedIn, 73% of Talent Acquisition professionals agree that "AI will change the way companies hire".

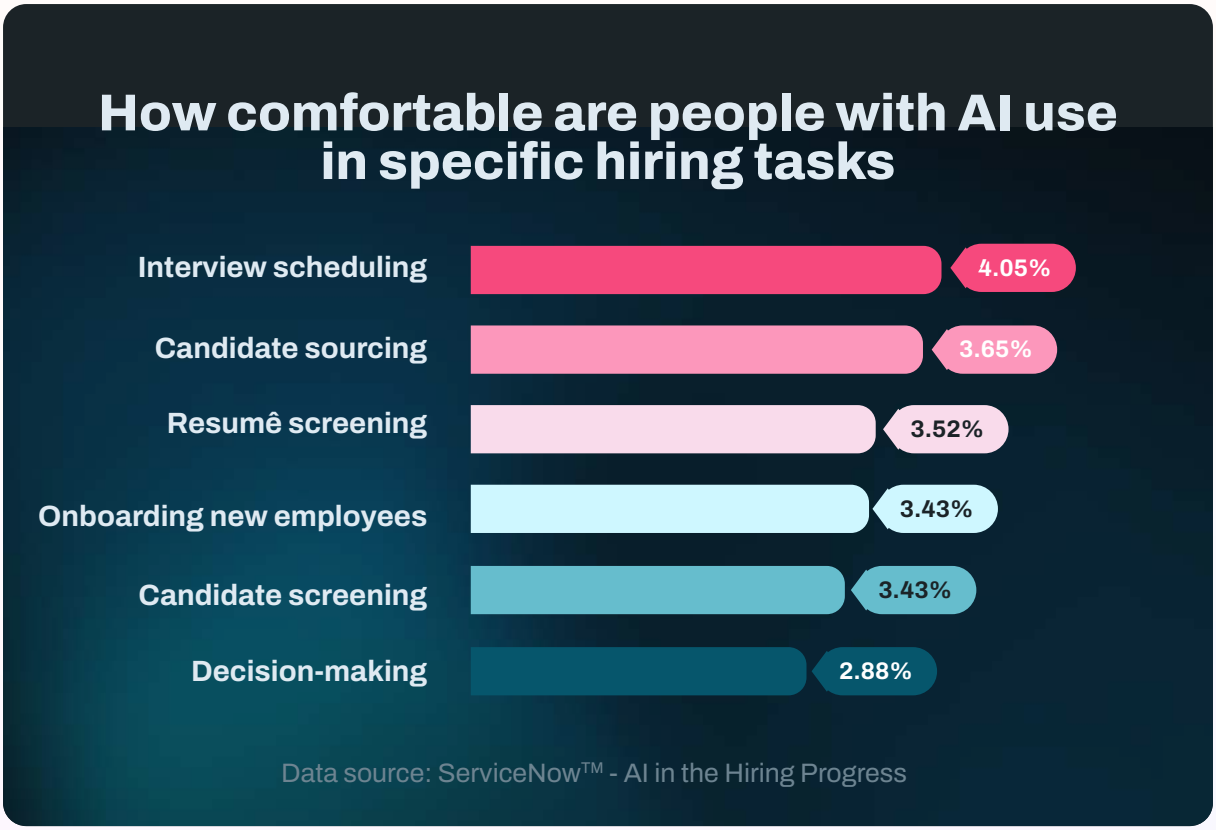
Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt

That same research also found that even among those companies already using AI in the hiring process believe it produces biassed results:



According to a survey of more than 1,000 people by ServiceNow[4] "67% of job seekers said they're 'uncomfortable' with employers using AI to review resumes and make decisions."

Furthermore, 90% said they want companies to be upfront about using AI in recruiting and hiring.



The survey found that comfort levels vary depending on the task AI performs, and the concerns around use of AI in hiring come down not only to bias (43%), but also personalisation (61%) and privacy (53%).

So there is a trust issue with AI solutions to recruitment and hiring, not only among job-seekers and candidates, but even with the employers using those very solutions.

Some of this concern is fuelled by Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt (FUD) in the media and circulated by vested interest groups. However, in some cases the perceptions are based on real-life cases.

Evidence of bias

Perhaps the most famous case of AI bias is that of Amazon[5] who, in 2015, discovered that a resume-screening algorithm was returning results that were prejudicial against women and over-represented men. Further examination revealed that this was because the algorithm was trained on the profiles of the existing workforce which was primarily male. The system was decommissioned in 2018.

In 2019, a class action law suit was filed against an AI-based hiring tool called HireVue[6] that was found to favour certain "facial expressions, speaking styles and tones of voice", thereby disproportionately discriminating against minority candidates.

Last year, research by a team at the University of Washington[7] found that in a study of how AI assessed 550 real-world CVs, "white-associated" male names were prioritised 85% of the time, over female names (11%) or "black-assciated" names (9%).

Mitigating against Bias

Of course, bias has been endemic in recruitment long before AI came along! Research by the UK's National Centre for Social research found that white candidates were favoured in 47% of cases[8] while candidates from an ethnic background were favoured only 18%. Equal treatment occurred in only 35% of the tests conducted.

Another study by the University of Oxford found that candidates from minority ethnic backgrounds had to send 80% more applications to get the same results as a White-British person.

In a study by Inside Out UK, identical job applications were made to 100 job opportunities, with the name the only variable. "Adam" was offered the job 12 times while "Mohammed" only 4.

Most AI experts agree that bias is indeed primarily a data fault that can be detected and programmed-out. There are various kinds of bias that can skew the results delivered by AI tools in recruitment, and these include:

If not addressed or identified, these kinds of data biases will cause outcomes that perpetuate a lack of diversity, causing consistent inequities and ethical, age or gender homogenisation.

Regular audits of the algorithm and data sets the AI is trained upon to ensure they are fully-representative and diverse is fundamental to fairness and balance. This can be done both internally, and by using independent external consultants. Various models can be used to A/B test and compare outcomes and to contrast with human-led decisions.

Arguably, bias is much easier to fix in AI than it is in people. This is best articulated by Furat Ashraf, an employment lawyer at Bird & Bird in London:[9]

"If you find the point of bias within AI and change the algorithm and train it on some additional data, then the issue should be fixed; something that is arguably much harder to do when dealing with humans."

- **Algorithmic bias, when errors in the algorithm lead it to make unfair or inaccurate decisions**
- **Sample bias, where the AI's training data is not sufficiently diverse**
- **Predictive bias, which is primarily a fault in how the AI scores candidates in terms of expected performance.**

Matching versus Scoring

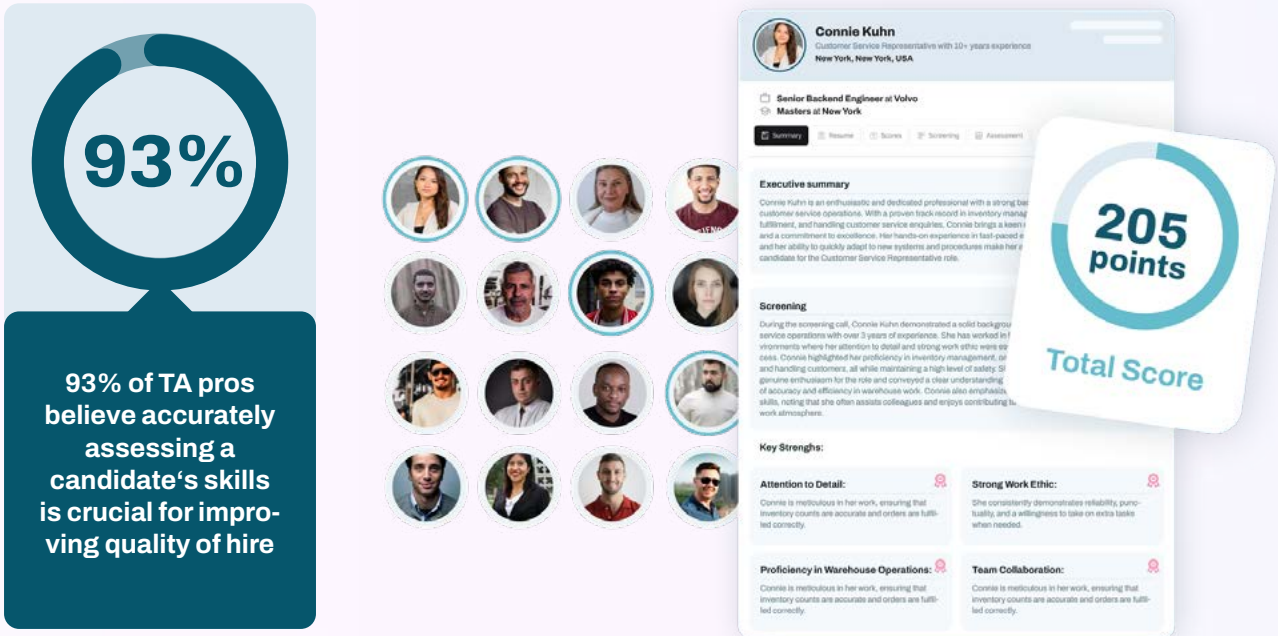
One aspect of AI-based hiring that is perpetuating biassed outcomes is ‘matching’ which is a common approach to ranking candidates by virtue of how well they align with or mirror the existing workforce. Naturally this kind of approach codifies or bakes in bias (such as in the Amazon case), and scales it into the future.

These types of models are rarely very transparent and can be quite opaque when it comes to revealing how they reach certain ranking decisions. This is no longer acceptable under the new EU AI Act which demands that employers are more transparent about how their recruitment decisions are made, and that their models are explainable and stand up to scrutiny.

As a result, scoring systems - such as the model we use at Vonq - are more transparent and explainable. Assessing candidates against a set of criteria or ‘vectors’ is more transparent and more effectively protects candidates against biassed decisions. AI models can be trained to ignore ethnicity, gender or other characteristics ultimately irrelevant to performance rather than replicating inequities already manifest in the workforce. This is known as a “skills-first” approach, that focusses on the candidate’s ability, aptitude and experience and ignores the characteristics that can introduce bias.

Take the example of someone with bartending experience applying for a customer service or support role. A traditional Matching system might dismiss them entirely for lacking “ customer service” on their CV. ... But a skills-first Scoring approach looks deeper - it sees transferable strengths like active listening, problem-solving under pressure, and a strong customer-facing mindset. Instead of disqualifying the candidate, it recognizes potential. That’s the power of scoring over matching.

This explains why a LinkedIn survey[10] found that companies leaning into skills-based searches the most are 12% more likely to make a quality hire.



The Adecco Experience

One of the principal benefits of using AI agents in recruitment is actually the potential for eradicating the kinds of unconscious biases that human recruiters can adopt without even knowing it.[11]

One of Vonq's customers, Adecco - a temporary staffing agency - found that while the language of candidates was often irrelevant to how well they can do a job, not sharing the same language as their human interviewer could prejudice their success in the process. Language nuance and cultural affinity can naturally, yet unfairly, advantage candidates that speak the same language as their interviewer.

AI agents can speak hundreds or even thousands of languages and dialects and can adapt to whomever they are interviewing. Therefore, during the interview process the playing field is entirely level as the agents can conduct interviews in whatever language candidates prefer.

Furthermore, the AI agents demonstrated far higher consistency in their performance than human interviewers can do. It is natural for recruiters under pressure, working long days against tight deadlines or delivery quotas can become tired, bad tempered or distracted. AI simply never deviates, meaning a far fairer and consistent experience for candidates.

Casting a wider net by coding out bias brings huge improvements to the hiring process for Adecco, as Simon explains:

Ending bias in hiring forever?

While there is widespread discomfort about certain perceived biassed hiring tendencies that AI can exhibit, these are often reinforced by a media narrative that reinforces this perception as a received wisdom.

Certainly there is evidence that discriminatory outcomes have taken place during hiring processes in which AI has played a role. But the assumption that this is an inevitable result of AI's participation is as illogical as it is erroneous.

Not only is it possible for technology vendors and employers together to work to mitigate, manage and minimise these outcomes, but there's a moral responsibility to do so.

However, it needs repeating that bias is not unique to AI! Humans have of course always been guilty of prejudicial decisions since the dawn of time. Ultimately the most optimistic and hopeful conclusion to reach about the use of AI in hiring is that the opportunity is there for humanity to remove bias from the hiring process altogether because of the innate objective nature of computing.

This is a reason to lean into the use of AI in the hiring process, not to be suspicious of it.

Above all, as long as there is consistency in the formula and model, there will be confidence and fairness. As long as there is explainability and transparency, there will be trust.

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Key Takeaways

- As AI plays a greater role in hiring, some flawed systems have allowed bias to affect the outcomes. But this is not a fault with AI per se, but instead with how AI has been applied to recruitment historically - in some cases.
- Not only can bias be eliminated from AI hiring processes, but it's possible to produce results even better than humans can achieve.
- Careful management of the data models can ensure bias is eliminated and ultimately the assessment of candidates is even more objective than when performed by humans.
- Examples of areas where this can be done include algorithmic bias, sample bias and predictive bias.
- Careful management of the data models can ensure bias is eliminated and ultimately the assessment of candidates is even more objective than when performed by humans.
- Finally, the multi-lingual, always-on and highly productive nature of Agentic AI means the delivery of recruitment outcomes that are smarter, faster, more accurate than those performed by humans...but also, fairer.

Ready to See Bias-Free Hiring in Action?

See how VON Q can help you deliver smarter, fairer, and more consistent hiring outcomes — at scale.

From intelligent candidate screening, scoring to multilingual interview automation, our solutions help you hire the right talent faster, with performance and fairness built in.

Get in touch