

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mrs. Berkhemer

FROM: Ms. Robinson

DATE: November 13, 2023

SUBJECT: Reevaluating Professionalism and Implicit Bias

What is professionalism? Perhaps this question clouds your mind with images of perfectly tailored suits, clean cut, short, straight, black or brown hair, a small set of inoffensive earrings, a tiny necklace, a bright face free of blemishes, eyebags, or excessive makeup, sporting a smile that is pleasant and unassuming. Yet, these details tell you almost nothing about the person standing before you.

Berkhemer Clayton Inc. is dedicated to placing the most professional talent around. Professionalism is at the core of our values in both our daily operations and in our selection process. With these values, we send the most polished and professional candidates to the companies we serve. We are aware that the best candidates will not all look the same or come from similar backgrounds and I appreciate that our firm knows differences are okay and can add value to any company.

But, this leads me to think about the intersection of these values. With our goals of diversity and inclusion, I think we should ask ourselves: what is professionalism, really? Is it simply a way of presentation and uniformity that signals one is serious about getting good work done? Is professionalism the absence of anarchy? Or, is it simply the absence of difference? We need to deconstruct what professionalism is and how it discriminates against the differences of background, thought, and expression we wish to find. This is necessary because I've seen this subtle discrimination in our selection processes.

Believe it or not, professionalism is based on a sameness rooted in white supremacy. While this is a hard pill to swallow, research validates this claim. What we regard as professional appearance and mannerisms all come from a history –and present– of wealthy, white, male, elite spaces. Traditional professional appearance comes from Western standards of beauty encompassing visual components like clothing, hair, and even physical features. The modern suit took shape in 1600's London, Amsterdam, and Paris (Dishman 2019), for example. Professional mannerisms have western roots as well. Most of corporate America and its social norms have been created by wealthy white men and as a result, the professionalism we practice is the remnants of these norms.

These origins have created a psychological impact that spurs implicit bias, “the automatic and unconscious associations people make based on discriminatory stereotypes” (Gray 2019), in the workplace. This leads to an inherent preference against anything that strays from the established western standards, whether that be a difference in race, social class, personal style, personal expression, or any type of difference; we unconsciously assume these differentiating traits make someone less competent.

Unfortunately, I've seen the impacts of implicit biases in our hiring practices. The pressure to be as close to this professional standard as possible leads people to cover up any semblance of difference, whether it be code switching, masking an accent, straightening their hair, etc. This leads me to ask: why is someone only worthy of respect and only taken seriously when they are adhering to standards that center elite white male society?

Professionalism, regardless of race and gender identity, stifles expression and difference. While uniformity can show that employees are striving toward a common goal, this doesn't need a constant visual component; it can be intrinsically understood. A team can be efficient and present themselves differently just as a classic, business-formal presenting team can be uncoordinated and ultimately unprofessional. This conundrum is one of the reasons why the professional world struggles with diversity and inclusion; if professionalism is so rooted in sameness and exclusivity, how are we going to incorporate things that, by definition, are opposites? These thoughts need to be challenged to not only diversify the workplace with different cultural and personal backgrounds, but also to create a more inclusive and psychologically safe work environment that breeds unique ideas. For example, including disabled people in innovative thought led to so many revolutionary ideas; texting probably wouldn't be where it is today if people who were hard of hearing didn't show a need for the practice (Kirschner 2023).

I'm not saying that we should disregard professionalism entirely; there are positive aspects of professionalism, of course. Professionalism expands past physical appearance and causal mannerisms. For example, professionalism can include universally recognized pleasantries like being respectful and cordial with colleagues and being timely. While some business cultures put more emphasis on these pleasantries than others, it is more fair to ask that employees are timely and cordial than to ask that they make changes to otherwise inoffensive physical appearances.

Ultimately, we must expand what professionalism looks like and notice when rigid pillars of professionalism are blocking our ability to see true potential in candidates. We can implement this habit through incremental changes in our day-to-day operations. For example, professional attire and mannerisms make for good first impressions, but once a positive impression is made, we should allow room for employees to dress and act more casual. This can look like going from a daily business formal dress code to a business casual one, or even having "casual friday" everyday, with exceptions when necessary. Look at other professional organizations that don't put as much emphasis on professional presentation; tech companies often have a "come as you are" approach to dress codes. We even see influential companies like Goldman Sachs adopting this dress code. Some speculate that the reasoning could be "to attract a younger and more diverse workforce," and that, "suits may send unintended messages about hierarchy and inclusiveness." (Dishman 2019) This suggests that informality in business does not erode confidence in one's business expertise. Conversely, excessive formality may decrease confidence and increase feelings of exclusivity in employees, especially while interacting with people perceived to be higher in the business's hierarchy. Goldman Sach's approach directly supports a reevaluation of professionalism.

When people are not focused on the anxiety of fitting in a mold of professionalism—a mold that is not made with different types of people in mind—employees can think better and let their true selves shine

through. While this is obviously not a perfect fix considering there are still many intrinsic differences among people, it is certainly a start. We've done great things in the corporate world; I truly believe that understanding the roots of professionalism and how they inform our implicit biases can lead Berkhemer Clayton Inc. toward our company goals of diversity and inclusion, and ultimately lead to more diversity of thought within the businesses we populate. Betsy, you've helped women break glass ceilings in some of the most male-dominated corporations; they certainly did not fit the established professional appearance norms at the time. Your work is inspiring. I know we can encourage similar change here and I would love your support in making it happen.

Sources

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AI Attestation

I attest that this paper did not use Artificial Intelligence at any stage in its development or in the creation of any of its components.