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Work, Observed

Moving Ethical AI Recruitment Beyond the Promises and into Practice.

In conversation with Jen Davidson



Expert perspectives on what's really happening at work as AI and automation reshape how we assess talent and capability.

WORK, OBSERVED

We publish perspectives from practitioners and researchers who examine what evidence actually tells us about hiring, capability, and performance—beyond assumptions and best-practice checklists.

This is work as it actually unfolds. Observed, examined, and understood.

The Big Picture

From Automating Bias to Evidence-Based Hiring: Moving Ethical AI Recruitment Beyond the Promises and into Practice.

AI has transformed recruitment. Faster shortlisting, higher volumes, reduced manual work. But speed without scrutiny creates a dangerous paradox: we're using yesterday's flawed hiring decisions to predict tomorrow's talent.

This paper examines why many AI recruitment systems reproduce historical bias at scale, how proxy data enables invisible discrimination, and why governance without evidence is just paperwork. It argues that ethical AI hiring isn't a vendor promise or a policy statement. It requires observable, validated assessment of actual capability.

For HR Directors and Hiring Managers navigating regulatory pressure and fairness concerns, this offers a framework for recruitment that is both efficient and defensible.

AI and the Future of Recruitment

Are we Creating Automatic Bias at Scale?

For HR Directors and Hiring Managers across the UK and Europe, AI in talent acquisition has delivered real efficiency gains. It has helped teams cope with volume, speed up processes, and reduce manual workload. That progress is welcome.

Yet a harder truth is emerging. We may be scaling discrimination as efficiently as we're scaling recruitment.

Many organisations have taken historical hiring decisions, fed them into algorithms, and labelled the result innovation. The time savings are real. So is the risk. If the past contained bias, the future built on that data will reproduce it quietly, consistently, at scale.

This creates a dangerous paradox. We're using yesterday's flawed decisions to predict tomorrow's talent.

The Analogue Failure We're Now Automating

Across the UK and Europe, automated sourcing and screening tools are now standard practice. Adoption has been fast. Often too fast. In many organisations, the decision to implement AI recruitment tools has been driven by competitive pressure rather than careful design.

The uncomfortable reality is that most recruitment algorithms are trained on historical hiring data that never reflected inclusive decision-making. Those records contain postcode bias, educational gatekeeping, and narrow career expectations. When algorithms learn from that history, they don't remove bias. They reproduce it with consistency and scale.

The widely reported Amazon case remains instructive. An AI system trained on past engineering hires began penalising candidates associated with women's activities. The system wasn't malicious. It was simply accurate in learning from flawed data.

This is where the issue becomes subtle. AI doesn't need to be told to discriminate. It only needs to identify patterns that correlate with past success, even if those patterns reflect exclusion.

Proxy Data and Invisible Discrimination

Legislation rightly prevents systems from directly filtering by protected characteristics. However, AI excels at identifying proxy indicators.

A postcode can imply socio-economic background. A university can imply ethnicity. A graduation date can imply age. A sports club can imply gender.

None of these variables are explicitly protected characteristics. Yet together they allow algorithms to infer them.The result is exclusion without visibility. Qualified candidates disappear from shortlists. Recruiters never see them. Bias becomes statistical, automated, difficult to detect.

This is why blind trust in AI hiring systems isn't just risky. It's negligent. Accountability remains with the organisation, not the software vendor.



> Do we actually know what predicts success in this role?

Evidence-Based Hiring as the Foundation

Before deploying AI in recruitment, organisations must answer a fundamental question: Do we actually know what predicts success in this role?

The answer cannot be based on who currently holds the job. That approach only reinforces historical patterns. Instead, organisations must identify the real competencies, behaviours, and decision capabilities that drive performance.

Research consistently shows that work sample tests and scenario-based assessments offer the strongest predictive validity. Structured interviews follow closely. By contrast, unstructured interviews and CV screening deliver weak prediction and high bias risk.

High-Volume Sifting Done Properly

There is a place for AI in recruitment. Initial sifting against genuinely objective criteria can expand access and reduce snap judgements. When configured correctly, AI can help create larger, more diverse shortlists. Human decision-makers then apply structured assessment methods at later stages. This balance protects fairness while retaining efficiency.

Proxy Data and Invisible Discrimination

European regulation now classifies recruitment AI as high-risk. This makes governance a board-level responsibility.

Organisations must demand transparency on training data, evidence of validation against job performance, and explanations for candidate scores. Recruiters must be trained in AI literacy so they understand limitations and know when to override algorithmic recommendations.

Overrides should be logged and used to improve systems, not hidden. Bias testing, adverse impact checks, and scenario-based evaluation for new roles ensure systems remain accountable as markets and work evolve.

Trust is the New Efficiency

Organisations that thrive will not be those with the fastest hiring algorithms. They will be those that can prove fairness, accountability, and evidence-based decision-making. Speed without trust creates risk. Trust creates sustainable advantage.

In a market where candidates research employers as carefully as employers screen candidates, demonstrable fairness becomes a competitive asset. The organisations building audit trails today are building talent pipelines for tomorrow.

From Principle to Practice

Observable Assessment, Defensible Decisions

Ethical AI recruitment requires practical, observable, evidence-based decision-making. This is where Traverse enters the picture.

Traverse places candidates in realistic workplace simulations. Instead of inferring capability from credentials, participants engage in role-specific tasks and decisions. Their choices are captured as structured data against criteria aligned to real job performance.

This reduces proxy bias because decisions are made on actual performance, not background signals. Human judgement remains central, supported by transparent scoring and auditable evidence trails.

Organisations can demonstrate how hiring decisions were reached and how fairness was monitored. This supports regulatory compliance while strengthening trust with candidates.

In practice, this means retaining AI for high-volume sifting while using simulation-based assessment for high-validity evaluation. The result is faster recruitment that is also fairer, more predictive, and more accountable.

Ethical AI hiring is not a theory problem. It is a practice problem. Traverse provides the infrastructure to make ethical hiring measurable, auditable, and real.

Get in touch.

Want to explore how evidence-based assessment can strengthen your hiring process?

ABOUT TRAVERSE

Traverse makes work decisions observable and measurable. The platform puts people into realistic simulations where their choices and reasoning are captured against role-validated criteria. This evidence-based approach helps organisations reduce bias, improve hiring accuracy, and assess capability that matters.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jen Davidson is an expert in people, culture, and responsible technology at work. She helps organisations build ethical, human-centred approaches to hiring and talent development in data-driven environments. Known for pragmatic clarity and a refusal to settle for surface-level solutions, she regularly advises senior leaders on aligning people strategy with real-world outcomes.

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