

Policy Brief

POLICY@SUSSEX | OCTOBER 2021

Automated job interviews and the implications for young jobseekers

Key findings

- Across the spectrum of video-based interview systems, job candidates experience progressive levels of de-personalisation.
- Asynchronous Video Interviews (AVIs) - where candidates video-record their answers and this is assessed at a later time – make candidates behave in a rigid way.
- Lack of transparency about how AVIs function and get assessed is highly disorientating for jobseekers and has a possible negative impact on their interview performance.
- Hiring platforms present oversimplistic information to candidates and employers.

INTRODUCTION

The role of artificial intelligence (AI) in our everyday lives is extensive. It is used in everything and everywhere: from taking an Uber to emailing or managing University coursework. AI technologies have also led to the rise of virtual assistants like Amazon's Alexa, Google Home or Apple's Siri. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that AI has infiltrated into the world of work, and its hiring processes, as well.

The New World of Hiring

The experience of jobseekers in the UK has been impacted by two concurrent forces: the rise of automation (for instance in the screening and scoring of applications¹), and the COVID-19 pandemic. Young jobseekers have therefore faced simultaneously a decrease in employment opportunities and an increase in technology-based hiring. According to a UK Parliament Briefing Paper², the number of young people in employment has fallen by 310,000 (8%). Moreover, between March 2020 and April 2021, the number of people aged 18-24 who were claiming unemployment benefits increased by 267,900 (an increase of 114%). Post pandemic, virtual hiring has been described as one of those tech changes which is here to stay.³

Video Interviews

One part of the hiring pipeline that has seen a notable change is the job interview. A poll run by Gartner, Inc. revealed that 86% of the organisations surveyed were 'incorporating new virtual technology to interview candidates due to the COVID-19 pandemic', whilst Job Description Library reported a 67% increase in the use of video interviews from 2020 – 2021. These video interviewing systems often rely on AI-based technologies to schedule, track, conduct and sometimes even assess interviews with job applicants.

A particular form of interview which has been widely used because of its cost-effectiveness is the Asynchronous Video Interview (AVI).⁴

The AVIs' Stakeholders

These interviews introduce a new stakeholder to the hiring process: the hiring platforms that design and host the video interview technology. In our research therefore we find that the three distinct stakeholders involved in AVI might have different, even clashing agendas⁵:

¹ Reynolds, D. H., & Dickter, D. N. (2017). Technology and employee selection: An overview. *Handbook of employee selection*, 855-873.

² Number 5871, 18 May 2021 (Powell & Francis-Devine, 2021)

³ Maurer, R. 2021 Recruiting Trends Shaped by the Pandemic, *H M*, February 1 2021. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/2021-recruiting-trends-shaped-by-covid-19.aspx>

IMPACTS ON JOBSEEKER EXPERIENCE

Our findings indicate that most candidates experience different degrees of de-personalisation, confusion, and self-devaluation during AVI job interviews. To meet the perceived demands of the AI technology respondents reported adopting progressively unnatural behaviours. The more the interview was automated, the more the candidate described feelings of de-humanisation and simultaneous feelings of empowerment of the AI-based technologies.

Participants' understandings of how their videos would be assessed made them conform to behavioural expectations, which they assumed would be positively rated by the platform.

Participants described the adoption of these heavily unnatural and inhuman behaviours as ‘becoming robotic’. At the same time, a demand to ‘act naturally’ in an AI-led interview setting felt anything but natural.

P2: “I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately.”

We, therefore, found a paradoxical dynamic by which attempts to reintroduce humanness and act 'naturally' could result in non-naturalistic actions.

P4: “... 30, 40, ...”

Consequently, young jobseekers experienced loneliness and eventual exhaustion through repeated interactions with the technology. The exhaustion was magnified by a need to sustain engagement in the absence of human contact, especially in interviews lacking any real-time feedback from another human.

P5: “...and I think it’s important to have people who are not afraid to speak up and say what they think. And I think that’s why we need to have people who are not afraid to speak up and say what they think.”

The process of de-humanisation, and of becoming a ‘bot’, was underpinned by an assumption about the power of AI-based interviews. Their opacity led candidates to ‘idealise’ the objectivity and effectiveness of the technology. Thus, on one hand, interviewees described the interview as difficult to understand, lacking transparency and as being ambiguous in terms of the assessment process, and on the other hand, they idealised it as the most efficient new norm.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that the young job seekers' perceptions of AVIs stem from the communications they receive from the Hiring Platforms. Hiring platforms present AI-based assessments as fair and as allowing employers to “increase diversity and mitigate bias”⁷. They thus entrench a culture of objectivity and meritocracy in the recruitment process. However, the methods for attaining such results are kept undisclosed. Most hiring platforms are zealously opaque about the actual functioning of their AI-based assessments, often claiming the protection of proprietary rights.

Hiring platforms promise employers an unprecedented capacity to scale up application reviewing. However, they have not provided the same capacity for providing specific and actionable feedback to candidates. Our research found that most candidates could not ascertain why they succeeded to the next stage of the interview process, or why their application had been unsuccessful. A substantial number of participants also described waiting months to hear back from some hiring platforms and/or employers.

7 See <https://www.hirevue.com/employment-diversity-bias>

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIRING PLATFORMS, EMPLOYERS AND HR MANAGERS

Greater transparency and accountability.

- Platforms need to ensure that the candidates using the technology understand how AVIs function from the outset. This might include specifying what data are collected, how they are used, and by whom and the measures they have taken to mitigate bias. These explanations have to be passed to the users in accurate terms.
- Employers would do well to coordinate with hiring platforms and develop greater guidelines for candidates, especially around data privacy.

Appropriate Prompt Feedback. Employers (and hiring platforms) should offer structured and constructive feedback to job candidates, which could be oriented towards giving them a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. In this way, many job candidates could see the time spent with video interviews as an investment, given that this process would offer them a way to hone their personal development.

Creating a Culture of Privacy and Informed Data Consent. Hiring Platforms inevitably deal with personal data. It is advisable that employers and platforms request consent from users to collect and keep their data, and inform candidates about the ways in which their data will be used. There is a need to review and clarify the legal framework for recording candidates during job interviews and ensure it keeps pace with public expectations.

Create a robust support system for candidates. Careers Services and Public Job Centres should develop a better understanding of the functioning of hiring platforms and develop a series of public awareness campaigns and other information resources for candidates.

CONCLUSIONS

Our recommendations highlight the importance of new measures to provide transparency and accurate information in the hiring process: a glass box approach. We recommend that AVIs should not be a candidate's only interaction with a company. Instead, platforms and employers need to properly balance any use of AI tools with a human approach. Automated systems might be good at assessing aspects that don't require emotional intelligence. But to a greater or lesser extent, every job post requires human interaction. The exclusive use of AVIs risks excluding part of the population that finds it more difficult to cope with the uncertainty and the depersonalisation process arising from AVIs. It is crucial, therefore, to keep building genuine relationships between candidates and hiring managers.⁸

⁸ 'Adopting a Glass-Box Approach to Hiring Technology'.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This project was funded by the University of Sussex Higher Education Innovation Fund COVID Recovery Programme.

The research used qualitative interviews with

