



**Beating pedigree bias:  
why tech teams should  
hire for skills, not labels**

**HIRE**D

## Let's put pedigree bias in the past

Pedigree bias has long plagued the recruiting landscape.

All too often, hiring teams seek sameness: targeting candidates with Ivy League degrees and Fortune 500 work experience. In doing so, they perpetuate stereotypes—and overlook talent that has taken the path less traveled.

"There's pedigree bias everywhere, especially in tech," said Cris Mercado, Founder & CEO of GrantAnswers, an organization committed to empowering marginalized communities through hands-on tech training. *"Pattern matching* is how I have heard hiring managers and senior leadership explain it. At best, that's intellectually lazy. At worst, that's systematic bias, and an acceptance that inequality is just fine."

In recent years, leading tech companies like Apple, Google, Netflix, and Tesla have challenged the status quo by removing college degree requirements for job applicants. Moving forward, other organizations must take similar actions to make the tech industry more accessible.

"The value of a pedigree as an indicator of long-term success at a company is depreciating rapidly," said Austen Allred, CEO and co-founder of Lambda School, an online coding school that offers remote programs centered around industry-critical skills. "The future of hiring will be based on skills, and the sooner we can redesign hiring practices to focus on the ability to do the job versus biased or arbitrary attributes, the sooner we'll increase access to higher-paying careers and create highly skilled, diverse hiring pipelines."

*"At best, that's intellectually lazy. At worst, that's systematic bias, and an acceptance that inequality is just fine."*

**CRIS MERCADO,  
FOUNDER & CEO OF  
GRANTANSWERS**

Interview request data from Vetter's online hiring marketplace shows that recruiters are moving in the right direction. From 2019 to 2020, computer science degrees decreased in importance by 4%, masters degrees by 3%, and top tech company experience by 3%. At the same time, candidates who supplemented college degrees with tech bootcamp experience increased their job placement odds by 2%, suggesting a growing premium on upskilling.

These changes need to continue in 2021.

To beat pedigree bias, recruiters must consistently look beyond labels and hire for skills. Yes, a Stanford-educated candidate may be suited for an open software engineering job—but so could the coding bootcamp graduate with fluency in your tech stack.

No school, degree, or past experience serves as an accurate proxy for proficiency. "We have plenty of students coming through our software engineering program who have computer science degrees but never learned how to build a functioning website in school," noted Erin Ford, Sr. Manager of Student Experience & Career Services at General Assembly, a pioneer in education and career transformation that provides instruction across data, design, business, and technology.

Setting pedigree aside, recruiting teams should evaluate candidates by asking: Whose hard skills would best support our organizational needs? Which portfolio demonstrates the most technical prowess? Who submitted stronger test assignments? Which candidate had standout soft skills during the interview process?

Together, these answers say much more about job-seekers than an alma mater or former employer ever could.

*"The future of hiring will be based on skills..."*

**AUSTEN ALLRED, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER OF LAMBDA SCHOOL**

## Pedigree bias perpetuates inequality

In hiring for pedigree, recruiters risk overlooking entire populations.

For instance, many STEM departments are male-dominated—so only considering computer science graduates may mean missing out on talented female coders. And with an Ivy League education costing upwards of \$60,000 per year, many people choose to attend more affordable (and lesser-known) colleges. Pedigree bias punishes these individuals for not fitting a predetermined mold—and blocks them from an industry they are eager to enter.

Apple CEO Tim Cook famously said: “The thing that makes the world interesting is our differences, not our similarities.”

Not only can diverse hiring practices increase company-wide innovation—they can also grow revenue by 19%. The corporate call to action couldn’t be clearer: It’s time to purge pedigree bias from recruiting practices.

As part of our commitment to accelerating skills-based hiring, Vetterry and Hired proudly partner with organizations that support tech candidates who have taken the path less travelled. Here, we’ll break down pedigree bias page by page: covering what it is, where it lurks, who it hurts, and—most importantly—how recruiters can combat it head-on.

*“The thing that makes the world interesting is our differences, not our similarities.”*

**TIM COOK, CEO OF APPLE**

## Shortcuts aren't the solution

Society often associates specific labels with success. Think: Harvard. Yale. Princeton. Facebook. Amazon. Google. But in exclusively hiring from these brackets, recruiters disregard talented candidates who gained skills through less traditional routes (like tech bootcamps).

Historically, many organizations have sourced talent from top colleges. But, what about skilled coders who couldn't afford the steep tuition? Similarly, recruiters often look for work experience at competitive companies that are largely composed of computer science graduates—so untraditional candidates don't stand a chance at being fairly considered for open roles.

This stems from perception bias: the tendency to form simplistic stereotypes and assumptions about certain groups of people. In hiring, this is a frequent shortcut used to avoid having to review and get to know untraditional candidates.

"When working with clients in agency staffing, there is definitely a pedigree bias when it comes to previous work experience," said Erin Ford, Sr. Manager of Student Experience & Career Services at General Assembly. "If a resume comes across your desk with big-name companies or hot agencies, it can sway a recruiter or hiring manager to look more deeply at a possible candidate, even if their work isn't as strong as someone who has worked at lesser-known companies."

With that, sameness is perpetuated—and talented, less traditional talent is overlooked.

*"If a resume comes across your desk with big-name companies or hot agencies, it can sway a recruiter or hiring manager to look more deeply at a possible candidate, even if their work isn't as strong as someone who has worked at lesser-known companies."*

**ERIN FORD, SR.  
MANAGER OF STUDENT  
EXPERIENCE & CAREER  
SERVICES AT GENERAL  
ASSEMBLY**

## No computer science degree? No problem.

What do Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg have in common? They're all college dropouts—and founders of multi-billion-dollar tech companies.

History shows that there isn't a singular route to success, and resumes don't share a person's full story.

Moving forward, companies must consider nontraditional candidates. Computer science graduates may be the industry's stereotypical picture of success—but a four-year education is not a prerequisite for excelling in tech.

Instead of seeking out specific colleges or degrees, companies should commit to skills-based hiring. One avenue that deserves more immediate attention? *Tech bootcamps*.

As an alternative to traditional computer science programs, bootcamps provide the opportunity to gain advanced tech skills at an accelerated pace—without the staggering institutional price tag.

According to data from Vettery's online hiring marketplace, 46% of bootcamp grads received one or more interview requests—and 9% of all bootcamp grads who made it to the interview stage received a job offer. In comparison, 8% of candidates with a computer science degree were placed after making it to the interview stage, as were 8% of candidates whose highest education is an undergrad degree. Bootcamp graduates clearly have the skills needed for success—they simply need to be given a chance.

"There's no doubt to me that more and more companies are willing to hire bootcamp graduates now than ever before," said Fahim ul Haq, CEO and co-founder of Educative, which offers text-based online coding courses for software developers across skill levels and around the world.

"I've personally seen so many cases in the last one to two years of bootcamp grads being hired at FAANG companies (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, and Google), something you wouldn't have seen much of even five or 10 years ago. Anecdotally, almost all hiring managers I've spoken to tell me that they're very willing to hire bootcamp graduates."

But it's only the beginning, and real change will require real work. In 2021 and beyond, companies must follow in trailblazers' footsteps to retire existing biases—and hire for what matters most.

*"There's no doubt to me that more and more companies are willing to hire bootcamp graduates now than ever before."*

**FAHIM UL HAQ, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER OF EDUCATIVE**

# Skills-based hiring is here to stay

Combatting pedigree bias will take conscientiousness and commitment. Here are three steps companies can take to get started:

## 1. LOOK BEYOND LABELS

Talent is not exclusive to elite institutions. Instead of filtering for top schools and companies, recruiting teams should commit to skills-based hiring.

Ask: What skills do candidates need to excel on the job? Proficiency in Python? JavaScript? SQL? Get specific. Rather than focusing on an alma mater or former employer, identify tangible qualities that will determine success in each role.

“Employers are looking for applicable skills from day one,” said Jennifer Harrold, Partnerships Lead & Career Coach at General Assembly. “Many four-year university degrees focus more on theory and origin rather than application,” she noted—whereas bootcamps focus on practical, hands-on learning.

What other steps can recruiting teams take to support skills-based hiring? “Send content blind to hiring managers, separately from a resume, to get feedback on a candidate’s technical prowess,” advised Harrold. “Then send along resumes for candidates they are excited about.” This encourages hiring managers to see skills first and experience second, making them less susceptible to bias.

“Recruiters and hiring managers alike look at the work—especially with junior talent,” added Erin Ford,

1. LOOK BEYOND THE LABELS
2. PURSUE NEW PARTNERSHIPS
3. TRY NEW TECHNOLOGY

Sr. Manager of Student Experience & Career Services at General Assembly. "You can clearly see potential in their code or design that isn't at all reflected in where they worked before."

## 2. PURSUE NEW PARTNERSHIPS

Partnering with mission-driven organizations can help broaden your candidate pool and pinpoint talent that may have been previously overlooked.

Here are a few inspiring teams that are actively combatting pedigree bias:

### EDUCATIVE

*"With the number of outstanding resources available, there's almost nothing you still need a university environment to learn."*

**FAHIM UL HAQ, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER OF EDUCATIVE**

Trusted by over 450,000 learners, Educative offers hands-on courses that help developers quickly gain in-demand tech skills. Courses are text-based, so learners can highlight materials, save notes, and proceed at their own pace. They're also broken down by difficulty, so there's something for people of all experience levels—whether that's a beginner course like "Build Your Own Chatbot in Python," an intermediate course like "Learn Scala from Scratch," or an advanced course like "Image Recognition for Machine Learning."

The team at Educative knows, from experience, that talent often takes nontraditional paths. "Some of the best engineers I ever worked with in my time at Microsoft and Facebook didn't have college degrees at all, let alone computer science degrees," said Fahim ul Haq, CEO and co-founder of Educative. "With the number of outstanding resources available, there's almost nothing you still need a university environment to learn."

### **GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

Vetter and Hired's sister company, General Assembly, is a pioneer in education and career transformation. The leading source for training and career transitions, they specialize in today's most in-demand skills to foster a flourishing community of tech professionals.

"Our programs not only teach [students] how to code, but also how to learn quickly in the ways required to ramp up to new skills on the job," said Erin Ford, Sr. Manager of Student Experience & Career Services at General Assembly. Through weeks or months of intensive education, bootcamp students master the art of adapting to change and absorbing information at an accelerated pace—which are major assets in the ever-evolving tech industry.

### **LAMBDA SCHOOL**

As an online coding school, Lambda School offers live, remote programs centered around industry-critical skills. Beyond covering the fundamentals of computer science, their courses give students the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge, build real products, and gain over 700 hours of coding experience.

Instead of having students bet on them, Lambda School bets on students first. Accessibility is built into their business model, with students paying tuition only *after* acquiring a job making \$50,000 or more.

"The traditional risk equation of education is deeply flawed," explained Austen Allred, CEO and co-founder of Lambda School. "It places an overwhelming burden on the individual—not the educators. I co-founded Lambda School with the underlying hypothesis that if we eliminate risk and align the incentives of students and schools on a large enough scale, we can democratize access to career and income mobility."

## **SKILLED**

***"It's easier to group someone, rather than trying to get to know them: who they are and what dreams and aspirations they have."***

**AMIR SAVAR, FOUNDER AND CEO OF SKILLED**

Skilled is a virtual career center that interviews, educates, and certifies job-seekers to help them get hired. Their goal is to provide affordable and easy access to world-class mentorship—and since 2016, they've been making good on that mission.

"Skilled was launched due to very explicit pedigree bias practices being implemented at some of the top startups in our ecosystem," explained Amir Savar, founder and CEO of Skilled. "Ironically, these biases were never malicious, but rather disguised as efficiency—spurred by the desire high-growth companies have to hire as many fantastic people as quickly as possible."

Operating this way, however, has harmful consequences. "When you're targeting and aiming for pure efficiency, that's when you close a lot of doors," said Savar. "That's when you start labeling and putting people in brackets—because it's a lot easier to do that, right? It's easier to group someone, rather than trying to get to know them: who they are and what dreams and aspirations they have. It's a lot easier to say, 'He went to Stanford, so he must be smart. Right?' Simple."

But degrees alone don't denote intelligence, and experience does not equal expertise. As Savar suggested, efficiency can easily breed exclusivity—thereby barring worthy talent from the tech landscape. His organization helps job-seekers be seen for what truly matters: their skills.

### THE KNOWLEDGE HOUSE

The Knowledge House is an award-winning digital technology school that has served 1,750+ students since 2014. Through year-long data science and web development courses, the organization strives to empower aspiring tech professionals and alleviate poverty in low-income communities.

"Our way to bypass the pedigree bias within tech has been to give our hiring partners access to our fellows through volunteering," said Derrick Stroman, Business & Partnerships Manager at The Knowledge House.

"The engagements we offer allow our hiring partners to develop parts of our curriculum to ensure a direct talent pipeline. They're also able to witness the growth of our fellows' technical skills through tutoring and guest lecturing. The bond between our fellows and partners is essential when hiring candidates with untraditional backgrounds." Working closely with students, recruiting teams see firsthand that pedigree does not determine potential—skills do.

## 3. TRY NEW TECHNOLOGY

Artificial intelligence (AI) powers many of the world's most innovative processes. And now, it's even removing human biases from hiring.

As written in [Entrepreneur magazine](#), AI helps recruiters "look beyond the polished resumes and glorified recommendations" so companies can hire "the most creative and effective members" for their teams.

Built to combat unconscious biases, [Hired Assessments](#) help companies easily mask candidate photos and names for more objective hiring. From there,

recruiters can standardize the evaluation process by choosing from Hired's library of relevant, valuable, and consistent assessment questions. This way, skills are the center of attention rather than colleges or company names.

Criteria Corp also uses technology to tackle pedigree bias—providing organizations with unbiased pre-employment tests designed to prompt better hiring decisions. Backed by science and delivered through a user-friendly platform, these assessments paint a more complete picture of candidate potential.

When it comes to compensation, organizations should consult industry salary data to determine fair wages based on skills, not background. In Hired's 2020 State of Salaries Report, we saw substantial gaps between white tech professionals and their Black and Hispanic counterparts. The salaries offered to Black candidates were the lowest of any racial group and \$10k less on average than those offered to white candidates, suggesting that unspoken biases are still poisoning hiring practices.

Advanced technology provides us with the opportunity to change this narrative—and remove pedigree bias from the recruiting landscape.

## Building a more inclusive future starts today

Combatting pedigree bias won't be easy. But it will be worth it.

Across the industry, companies must critically reflect on their hiring practices. "Are 40% of the candidates you're interviewing coming from Stanford and Berkeley? That should be a red flag," said Fahim ul Haq, CEO and co-founder of Educative. "This is where I think tools like Hired help: they let companies screen for skills in a way that's more blind to pedigree."

At Vetterry and Hired, we strongly believe in skills-based hiring. There is no singular path to success: college degrees and work experience alone cannot predict technical prowess. Highly skilled candidates deserve spots on tech teams—whether they attended a bootcamp, attained a four-year degree, or were completely self-taught.

Together, we can build a more equitable working world that teems with diverse perspectives—and is devoid of pedigree bias.

*"Are 40% of the candidates you're interviewing coming from Stanford and Berkeley? That should be a red flag."*

**FAHIM UL HAQ, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER OF EDUCATIVE**

Ready to put skills-based hiring at the forefront? Since 2012, Hired has been matching top tech talent with the world's most innovative companies. Dive into our pool of 20,000+ skilled job-seekers to make your recruiting process more efficient—and equitable—than ever.

#### **ABOUT HIRED**

Hired (Hired.com) is a marketplace that matches tech talent with the world's most innovative companies.

Hired combines intelligent job matching with unbiased career counseling to help people find a job they love. Through Hired, job candidates and companies have transparency into salary offers, competing opportunities and job details. This level of insight is unmatched, making the recruiting process quicker and more efficient than ever before.

Hired was founded in 2012 and is headquartered in San Francisco, with offices in the United States, Canada, France, and the UK.

For more information, news, and tips for job candidates and employers, visit [Hired's blog](#).



**HIRE**

Beating pedigree bias: why tech teams  
should hire for skills, not labels