UNIVERSITY OF MANNHEIM

COMMUNICATIONS

**Communications department**
Phone: 0049 (0)621 181-1016
pressestelle@uni-mannheim.de
www.uni-mannheim.de

**Mannheim, 21 November 2024**

# Press Release

## Research on Discrimination: Access to Professional Networks is Crucial

**Black people in the USA are disadvantaged in terms of access to relevant professional networks compared to White Americans. However, those who are already part of a professional network enjoy the same benefits. Lunch dates with randomly selected persons help to break up entrenched structures in companies.**

Half of all jobs in the USA are found through recommendations in informal networks, such as LinkedIn. High-paying jobs are usually filled by influential people with inside knowledge. Groups that are underrepresented on the job market have less access to high-profile jobs and benefit less from their professional networks. However, previous research does not explain why their networks are less effective. In an experimental study, Mannheim economists Yulia Evsyukove, Felix Rusche, and Professor Dr. Wladislaw Mill investigated whether discrimination affects the size and quality of the job networks of Black Americans and is therefore a cause of their underrepresentation in high-profile jobs. The study shows that the core problem for this group is gaining access to professional networks. Overcoming this hurdle is not easy because Black Americans are discriminated against because of their appearance. But once they are members of a network, they receive the same information and the same support as White people. The study was recently published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, one of the leading journals in economics.

For the study, Mill and his colleagues conducted an experiment on LinkedIn - the world's largest and most widely used online job network. In the first phase of the experiment, the team created 400 artificial profiles. Only AI-generated portrait images provided information about the person's skin color – all other information was neutral. For eight weeks, the fake profiles sent networking requests to a total of 20,000 LinkedIn users. On average, every fourth request was accepted. In the second phase of the experiment, specific questions were sent to the newly acquired networks, such as requests on how to get a certain job and who to contact for a certain job.

“We were surprised that in the second phase of the experiment, the people behind the fake profiles were treated without prejudice and that their queries were answered equally often regardless of their skin color,” says Mill. “Those who are already part of a professional network therefore enjoy the same benefits,” states the economist.

In contrast, there were clear indications of discrimination in the first phase of the experiment, when the fake profiles tried to gain access to the networks: The acceptance rate of requests from Black people was thirteen percent lower than that of White people.

According to the authors, the results of the study show ways of dealing with discrimination in a professional context. “Access to networks is crucial,” explains behavioral economist Mill. Companies could make this easier for their employees, for example, by organizing networking events and offering training in this area. To break up established structures, some companies organize randomly selected "lunch dates", for example. Spontaneously allocating tables at conferences has also been proven to be helpful, says Mill. This allows participants to meet with people they might not otherwise have chosen.

Yulia Evsyukova, Felix Rusche, Wladislaw Mill. *LinkedOut? A Field Experiment on Discrimination in Job Network Formation*. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* (2024): https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjae035

You can find an expert video on the study (in English) here.

**Contact:**
Professor Dr. Wladislaw Mill
Assistant professor of economics, behavioral economics
University of Mannheim
Phone: +49 621 181-1897
E-mail: mill@uni-mannheim.de

Yvonne Kaul
Research Communication
University of Mannheim
Phone: +49 621 181-1266
e-mail: kaul@uni-mannheim.de