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# 1

## Hiring in the New Economy

Employment is central to the economic security and well-being of individuals and their families in the United States. Jobs provide wages and benefits. Jobs provide opportunities for skill development and growth. Jobs provide many of the building blocks necessary for other domains of one's life, such as health, housing, and family. At its core, this book is about the allocation of employment opportunities in the contemporary economy—an economy where millions of workers have experience in positions that are part-time, through temporary help agencies, and well below their skill level. In this environment, how do workers get jobs? How does the hiring process actually work? And, ultimately, who comes out ahead?

Accessing employment opportunities is a complex matching process between employers and workers.<sup>1</sup> Employers are looking for the right employees to execute the tasks needed by their companies. Workers are looking for the right jobs. Jobs that provide them with a set of material and subjective rewards, such as wages, benefits, and satisfaction. The underlying mechanics of how the matching of workers and employers actually happens, however, is far from straightforward.<sup>2</sup> There is no centralized system to assign workers and employers to one another. There is no single way that workers decide which employers they want to work for. And there is no single criterion on which employers evaluate job applicants.

Understanding how this matching of workers and employers takes place has been a central concern of social scientists for decades.<sup>3</sup> Scholars often conceptualize the labor market as a two-sided matching process. The supply

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side focuses on workers—their education, training, preferences, and behaviors. The demand side focuses on employers—their needs, desires, and evaluative criteria for hiring workers. While understanding both sides of the process is important, this book centers its attention on the demand side of the equation: employers and their decision making.<sup>4</sup> A large body of research concentrating on hiring finds that, more than simply prioritizing technical skills and credentials, employers and hiring professionals care about a broad array of other worker characteristics during the hiring process. They want workers who comply with “ideal worker” norms of commitment and competence.<sup>5</sup> They want workers with soft skills and the “right” personality.<sup>6</sup> They want workers who are a “fit” with the organization’s culture, its workers, and its managers.<sup>7</sup>

The set of criteria that hiring professionals use to evaluate job applicants lies at the center of this book. Recognizing the changing nature of work and employment in the United States, *Making the Cut* asks whether the ways that employers evaluate potential employees have kept pace with this shifting economic landscape. As existing scholarship has demonstrated, the underlying organization of work in the United States does not look the same as it did in the middle of the twentieth century, a period when many of our current models of employment relations emerged.<sup>8</sup> There has been a decline in manufacturing employment and an increase in service sector employment.<sup>9</sup> The occupational structure has become more polarized, with both high- and low-wage job growth outpacing the growth of middle-wage jobs.<sup>10</sup> Technological advances, such as the increasing importance of computers and the internet, have reshaped the ways that work takes place.<sup>11</sup> Global economic integration has generated new forms of competition.<sup>12</sup> And employment relations have also changed. Internal labor markets—where companies promote workers through career ladders at the company—have declined.<sup>13</sup> Many organizations now rely on nonstandard and contingent labor too.<sup>14</sup> This set of shifts—as well as others—is part of the bundle of changes resulting in what scholars often refer to as the “new economy.”<sup>15</sup>

Workers’ experiences have been deeply altered by these realities. Feelings of economic insecurity are widespread.<sup>16</sup> Individuals and families feel pressed financially, uncertain of how they will survive and thrive.<sup>17</sup> And employment relationships—as well as the obligations between workers and employers—have shifted.<sup>18</sup> Millions of workers now labor through temporary help agencies, in part-time positions, at jobs below their skill level, and as independent contractors, freelancers, on-call workers, and day laborers.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, long-term unemployment and its associated challenges

have become commonplace in the labor force, particularly during periods of recession and recovery.<sup>20</sup> While the growth in some of these types of alternative employment relationships may be overstated in the public imagination,<sup>21</sup> one thing is clear: millions of workers labor in nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious positions.<sup>22</sup>

Against this backdrop, *Making the Cut* inspects one key component of the insecurities faced by workers: nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment experiences. Specifically, I examine the consequences of part-time work, temporary agency employment, skills underutilization, and long-term unemployment for workers' employment opportunities. To date, scholars have examined how these positions affect a set of important worker outcomes: wages, benefits, autonomy and control, subjective well-being, job security, and health, to name a few.<sup>23</sup> Much less attention, however, has been directed to the consequences of these employment positions for workers' future opportunities in the labor market, specifically their ability to obtain a new job.

Have hiring professionals and employers updated the ways they evaluate job applicants to align with the current economic structure? If assumptions of an unrealistic and outdated economic landscape remain embedded in hiring professionals' criteria of evaluation, those assumptions might exacerbate or mitigate inequality during the hiring process. How would a hiring manager evaluate a college graduate with multiple years of managerial experience but who then ended up taking a retail job? What about an administrative assistant who spent a year working through a temporary help agency? How might a woman who moved in to a part-time sales position after many years of full-time sales jobs be perceived by recruiters and hiring managers?

*Making the Cut* takes on this set of issues. The pages that follow tackle the overarching question of whether employers systematically screen out job applicants with histories of nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment in favor of those who have remained in full-time, standard jobs at their skill level. If so, then workers with nonstandard, mismatched, or precarious employment experiences will be blocked from opportunities because they will be unable to move on to new jobs. In this case, these types of employment experiences may serve as an important driver of inequality in the new economy. But if the answer is no, then there may be an important role for these types of employment positions in serving as stepping stones to new employment opportunities for workers as they navigate the tumultuous labor market.

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One can imagine, though, that the consequences of these employment experiences are not uniform or universal. Take the woman discussed above who moved from years of full-time sales experience in to a part-time sales position. What if she were a man? Would he be perceived differently? What if he were African American? While a significant body of scholarship indicates that women and racial minorities face discrimination during the hiring process, it is not clear how nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment histories may intersect and interact with these traditional axes of social inequality.<sup>24</sup> It is quite possible that employment experiences that deviate from common conceptions of a “good” job will reinforce existing inequalities by race and gender, further disadvantaging women and racial minorities. By contrast, there may be a complex interaction between social categories and employment histories such that those workers with more status and privilege in the labor market—such as white men—face particularly negative consequences of these types of nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment experiences. These contrasting possibilities hold important implications for understanding how inequalities in the labor market are produced and maintained in the new economy.

### **Making Hiring Decisions**

Employers make hiring decisions behind closed doors. But as it turns out, we actually know quite a lot about how these decisions get made. One prominent line of research on hiring decisions focuses on discrimination.<sup>25</sup> While it is illegal to discriminate based on certain worker characteristics—such as race and gender—clear evidence shows that discrimination in hiring persists in the US labor market.<sup>26</sup> And scholarly interests in this area have focused on the underlying processes that may drive discriminatory behavior. While there are many theories as to why discrimination occurs, scholars often situate them in two broad groups: “statistical” and “preference-based” discrimination.<sup>27</sup> Statistical models of discrimination emphasize the ways that decision makers take attributions of group-level characteristics and then apply them to individual members of that group. For example, a hiring manager may take her perceived average productivity of older workers as a group and then assume that any individual worker who is older is as productive as that “average” older worker. By contrast, preference-based models of discrimination conceptualize discrimination as the result of biases and stereotypes about particular groups of workers. Discrimination against older workers may emerge, for example, due in part to employers’ negative

stereotypes of older workers as being less competent or motivated. While the precise mechanisms are distinct, under conditions of uncertainty and limited information—as are often the case when making initial decisions about job applications—these two broad perspectives on discrimination generally offer similar predictions about what groups will face discrimination during the hiring process.<sup>28</sup>

A second key line of scholarship on hiring decision making has focused on human capital, signaling, and credentialism explanations. These theories largely place education and skills at the center of employers' hiring decisions. While the precise driving force for decision making in each perspective is distinct, they all propose a key link between education and hiring outcomes.<sup>29</sup> In its most basic form, imagine a model of hiring decisions where employers are attempting to use information about job applicants' education and skills to match them appropriately to a position within their firm. Employers are aligning particular educational backgrounds with particular organizational tasks. The applicants who are the best matches—and therefore who are predicted to be most productive—are interviewed and then, ultimately, hired.

Yet scholars have complicated this stylized picture, highlighting additional factors that employers consider when making hiring decisions. Employers also care about soft skills and personality, compliance with ideal worker norms of commitment and competence, and fit.<sup>30</sup> Employers want to hire individuals who can interact well with customers and clients. They want individuals who are going to get along with other workers and with managers at their organization. They also want workers whose backgrounds and interests—particular types of music or sports<sup>31</sup>—align with the organizational culture. And—certainly in white-collar jobs—employers want workers who can exhibit complete dedication to their jobs, free from the competing demands that come with raising children or taking care of sick or elderly parents.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the worker who is likely to come out on top in the hiring process is not just the worker with the best education, technical skills, or knowledge for the position. To be hired, a worker needs to excel—or be perceived as excelling—on these other dimensions of evaluation as well.

Obtaining information about these deeper characteristics of job candidates early on in the hiring process, especially from just their resume and cover letter, is challenging. It is this moment in the hiring process—the point of initial applicant screening, where information and time are extremely limited—that is emphasized in much of *Making the Cut*. This moment is

particularly important because it is where first impressions are formed and hiring professionals decide who moves forward in the hiring process and whose application is left in the pile. Yet it is difficult to get a sense of someone's personality and interaction style from a resume. Similarly, knowing whether someone will fit in well at an organization can be difficult if one has only a cover letter. Direct measures of commitment and dedication are also unlikely to appear in one's application materials. Yet this is information employers want to have. It matters to them.<sup>33</sup> Under these conditions of limited information, employers are likely to use whatever they can access in order to make inferences about these attributes of the job applicant.<sup>34</sup>

What information do employers actually have during the initial review of applicants? Because names appear on their resumes and cover letters, employers are often able to infer the gender—and sometimes the race—of applicants. This type of assumed demographic information has, indeed, been linked to discrimination in the hiring process.<sup>35</sup> Hiring professionals can also generally get a sense of the age of the applicants from their years of work experience as well as graduation dates from high school or college.<sup>36</sup> They will likely also know where applicants live and where they went to school.<sup>37</sup> Many resumes have information about volunteer and extracurricular activities as well.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, potential employers will have details about the applicants' employment history—the tasks they completed, the organizations they worked for, and their trajectory through different jobs. These pieces of information are likely used by hiring professionals, consciously or unconsciously, to make broader determinations about workers. They may lead to inferences about workers' soft skills, personality, fit, and likely compliance with ideal worker norms of commitment and competence.

Indeed, scholars have generated a large body of research documenting the ways that these observable signals—even the ones not directly related to productivity—are converted into decisions about which applicants to call back for an interview. Scholars have found that—holding all else equal—the following applicant attributes have a direct effect on callbacks: race, gender, prestige of one's undergraduate institution, parental status, sexual orientation, social class background, immigrant status, and religion.<sup>39</sup> Crucially, many of these observable signals—or inferred observable signals—are used as proxies for other, often unobservable, attributes during the hiring process and are commonly associated with deep sets of cultural beliefs or stereotypes.<sup>40</sup> In the case of race, for example, scholars have uncovered employers' stereotypes of African American workers as lazy and less skilled than their white counterparts, which may lead employers to make negative inferences

about African American workers' expected productivity.<sup>41</sup> Here, an observable signal—race—ends up serving as a stand-in for a difficult-to-observe characteristic. From this example, we can see how stereotypes can bias the ways that job applicants are evaluated, resulting in durable inequalities between groups.<sup>42</sup> In another example that will be important later on, there is a gendered set of stereotypes that exist around parenthood: lower levels of perceived competence and commitment for mothers compared to fathers. These stereotypical beliefs can drive bias against mothers and women of childbearing age.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, stereotypes of this sort will play a central role in making sense of how gender intersects with certain types of employment experiences to influence hiring professionals' evaluations during the job applicant screening process.

The title of the book—*Making the Cut*—captures two important underlying currents that run throughout the following pages. First, it points to the key question of which workers are actually able to rise to the top of the application pool. What makes applicants good enough? What do they need to do to actually make the cut? Second, the title highlights the central decision-making moment examined in the book: hiring professionals deciding whom to interview for a job. What underlying processes lead employers to call back some applicants for interviews while excluding others? In other words, how do hiring professionals actually make the cut, separating the yes pile from the no pile?

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Evaluating job applicants does not happen in a vacuum. The broader social and economic context matters. Next, we turn to the ways that work and employment have changed and developed in the United States. Understanding how the economic landscape has shifted in the previous decades will provide the necessary backdrop for thinking through the ways that hiring professionals make sense of nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment histories.

## **The Structure of Work and Employment in the New Economy**

Many of us—including employers, hiring managers, and recruiters—hold on to largely mythical notions of what a job is, what a job should be. Or at least what a “good” job should be.<sup>44</sup> These ideas often suggest that a job

should provide adequate wages and benefits as well as opportunities for advancement, should be full-time and have some sense of security surrounding ongoing employment as long as workers generally fulfill their workplace obligations, and should utilize workers' skills and training.<sup>45</sup> Of course some workers desire alternative types of arrangements, such as part-time employment or temporary work. Even as the work lives of an increasing number of Americans deviate from this ideal, there remains a powerful, common cultural understanding of a what work should look like.

While it is debatable whether this ideal type of job was ever the most common experience for workers in the United States,<sup>46</sup> it is clear that full-time, standard jobs at workers' skill levels are not a reality for many today.<sup>47</sup> Workers often find themselves in positions that deviate from core aspects of this paradigmatic "good" job. They may only have part-time employment, working for twenty instead of forty hours per week. They may be employed through an intermediary organization—a "temp agency"—and thus have limited security as to ongoing employment. They may have jobs that are well below their level of skill, experience, or education, which social scientists often refer to as skills underutilization. Or they may be unable to find employment at all, even though they are dedicated to searching, and therefore experience long-term unemployment. These four types of employment experiences are conceptually unified in that they all deviate from common conceptions of a "good" job.

As a somewhat crude proxy for having a "good" job, we could look at reported job satisfaction levels. Evidence from nationally representative survey data in the United States indicates a significant decline in workers' overall job satisfaction between 1977 and 2006.<sup>48</sup> And when workers are not able to obtain a "good" job, they often blame themselves and feel responsible for making things work and developing their own opportunities.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, in her in-depth account of how people search for jobs in the new economy, anthropologist Ilana Gershon highlights the ways that workers increasingly conceive of themselves as their own business. Workers see themselves as responsible for staying afloat, maintaining their skills, and pitching themselves to their customers, potential employers.<sup>50</sup>

Due to the prevalence of nonstandard and mismatched positions and the decline in internal labor markets—where individuals would advance in their careers within a given company—workers are more likely than in the past to have experiences in nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious positions when applying for new jobs. Yet while the structure of the new economy renders good jobs more difficult to attain for many workers, highly personalized

and individualized perspectives on work and employment likely leave workers feeling as if they should be able to maintain full-time, standard, seamless employment trajectories. This raises the question of whether employers see things the same way. As employment experiences diverge from conceptions of the “good job” and the “ideal worker,” have hiring professionals updated their evaluation criteria to align with changes in the structure and experience of the current economic landscape, or do they want workers who have consistently held “good” jobs?

This tension—between the changing economic structures that have made “good” jobs less available to many workers and employers’ conceptualizations of what it means to be an ideal worker—drives this book. Throughout, I argue and present evidence that employers’ hiring evaluation criteria have not developed to align with the structure of the new economy, resulting in a disjuncture between what employers want and the common experiences that workers have as they move through their careers. The result of this disjuncture is a complex set of inequalities that emerge in the contemporary labor market.

Building on these insights, I advance three primary arguments. First, I assert that hiring professionals extract meaning from workers’ nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment experiences. That is, future employers infer from these types of employment histories information about workers’ technical skills, their soft skills and personality, their competence and commitment, and to some extent their fit. At the same time, the meanings extracted from these employment experiences are not necessarily clear-cut or consistent across types of employment. And these experiences often end up raising questions and inducing uncertainty in hiring professionals about the quality of the worker. Second, I propose that the consequences of nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment experiences are not all equal. Some types of employment experiences are severely penalized by future employers, others are not. Yet it is difficult to separate the consequences of these employment experiences from the social characteristics of the workers who occupy these jobs. This leads to the third central argument of the book: identities matter. The race and gender of job applicants intersect in powerful ways with nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment histories to shape divergent outcomes for workers during the hiring process.

An overarching theme throughout the book—and supporting the three underlying arguments articulated above—is that hiring professionals express the need for a story, a narrative to make sense of workers’ experiences with

nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious work. Yet at the initial moment of applicant screening, workers are often unable to tell their story and employers are often left with questions. All the hiring professional has is an applicant's resume and cover letter. With this limited information and little time to evaluate job applicants, difficult decisions have to be made. Thus, hiring agents develop what I refer to as *stratified stories*. Using information about applicants not directly related to their employment trajectory, such as their race or gender, hiring professionals draw on group-based stereotypes to generate their own stories about workers' nonstandard, mismatched, or precarious employment experiences. The result is divergent gendered and racialized consequences of these different employment histories. While I develop and deploy the concept of stratified stories to understand the intersection of social identities and employment histories at the hiring interface, this concept likely translates beyond employment. Stratified stories may operate in other institutional domains and evaluative contexts, such as sentencing in the criminal justice system and diagnosing illness in the health care system.

### **Studying How Hiring Decisions Are Made**

To examine how hiring works in the new economy and to understand the consequences of nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious work for hiring decisions, I draw on two complementary types of data throughout this book: (1) field-experimental data on actual hiring decisions and (2) in-depth interviews with hiring professionals. While the field-experimental data provide a direct lens into employers' behaviors—how they actually treat workers with different types of employment experiences—the interviews provide fine-grained insights into how employers think and talk about different types of workers and employment histories.

#### **OBSERVING EMPLOYERS' BEHAVIORS: A FIELD EXPERIMENT**

Two of the central questions addressed in this book are the following: (1) How do histories of nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment affect workers' hiring outcomes? and (2) Do these consequences vary by the race and gender of the worker? Answering these questions requires having data on hiring professionals' behaviors, rather than their attitudes, beliefs, and narratives. Obtaining data that directly capture how employers treat job applicants is a challenging task. Companies are often hesitant to share detailed information about their applicant pools and which

of those aspiring employees receive interviews. And even if it is possible to gain access to that type of information, it can be challenging to isolate the direct effect of a given employment history or demographic characteristic on an applicant receiving an interview. There are many moving parts to an application that could drive employer decision making besides those two features.

To address these dual challenges—gaining a lens onto employers’ behaviors and distilling the direct effects of employment histories as well as demographic characteristics—I conducted a field experiment where I sent fictitious job applications to apply for real job openings and then tracked employers’ responses to each application.<sup>51</sup> For the experiment, I submitted 4,822 fictitious job applications to apply for 2,411 job openings in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York between November 2012 and June 2013. The applications were sent to job openings in four broad occupational groups: administrative/clerical, sales, accounting/bookkeeping, and project management/management. Two very similar applications were submitted for each position. The main differences between the resumes in the experiment were (1) the type of employment the applicant had in the prior 12 months and (2) the names at the top of the resumes, which were used to signal the applicants’ race and gender. Everything else was held constant, enabling me to isolate how these two applicant characteristics affect employers’ decision making.

I signaled five different type of employment on the resumes that capture the key types of employment experiences that we are interested in understanding: (1) full-time, standard employment at the worker’s skill level; (2) part-time work in the worker’s occupation of choice; (3) temporary agency employment in the worker’s occupation of choice; (4) skills underutilization, where the worker was employed in a job below their skill level; and (5) long-term unemployment. A diagram of how the employment histories were structured for the field experiment is presented in Figure 1.1.

Additionally, the applications for each job opening were randomly assigned to a demographic group, using the name at the top of the resume to signal race and gender.<sup>52</sup> Gender is relatively easy to signal with names; for example, putting Matthew or Emily on a job application makes it clear that the applicant is a man or a woman, respectively.<sup>53</sup> Signaling race is much more complicated. For this experiment, I utilized two sets of names. The first were likely perceived by employers as either white or not racialized: Jon, Matthew, Emily, and Katherine. These names may not actually prime employers to think in racialized ways, and therefore they may default to assumptions of whiteness. I also utilized a set of names that are racialized

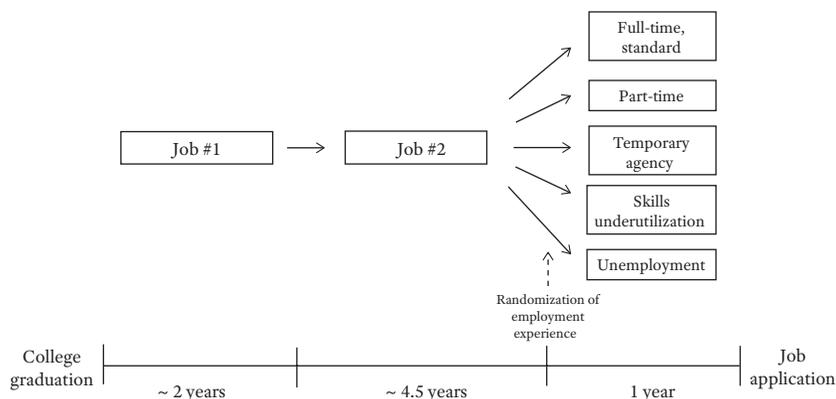


FIGURE 1.1. Employment History Structure for Field Experiment

as African American—Darnell, Tyrone, Kimora, and Kenya—and likely prime employers to perceive the applicant as African American.<sup>54</sup> I refer to applicants throughout the book as either “white/neutral” or “African American.”<sup>55</sup> The distribution of applications submitted in the field experiment is presented in Table 1.1.

After submitting the applications, I waited to see whether an employer responded to each application via phone and email. All responses were coded. A request for an interview or an invitation to discuss the position in more depth was coded as a positive response from the employer, what researchers often refer to as a “callback.” Given the design of the field experiment, I am thus able to estimate the direct, causal effect of each type of employment position on the likelihood of receiving a callback from an employer and how those consequences vary by the race and gender of the worker. In other words, the design of the field experiment provides direct evidence about the ways that nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment histories affect how employers treat workers. Additional details about the design and implementation of the field experiment are provided in the Methodological Appendix.

## TALKING TO HIRING PROFESSIONALS: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

While the field experiment provides powerful traction regarding employers’ behaviors, it leaves open questions about how hiring professionals actually think and talk about these different types of employment experiences. To

TABLE 1.1. Distribution of Applications Submitted in Field Experiment

	Frequency	Percentage
<b>EMPLOYMENT HISTORY</b>		
Full-time, standard	1,343	27.9
Part-time	707	14.7
Temporary agency	645	13.4
Skills underutilization	704	14.6
Unemployment	1,423	29.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,822</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>DEMOGRAPHIC GROUP</b>		
White/neutral men	1,198	24.8
African American men	1,212	25.1
White/neutral women	1,222	25.3
African American women	1,190	24.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,822</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>LABOR MARKET</b>		
Atlanta	598	12.4
Boston	952	19.7
Chicago	780	16.2
Los Angeles	1,010	21.0
New York City	1,482	30.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,822</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>OCCUPATION</b>		
Accounting/bookkeeping	780	16.2
Administrative/clerical	848	17.6
Project management/management	1,642	34.1
Sales	1,552	32.2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,822</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Field-experimental data.

unpack the processes and dynamics behind hiring in the new economy, *Making the Cut* also draws on data from fifty-three in-depth interviews conducted between late 2016 and early 2018 with a diverse set of hiring professionals in the United States. Hiring professionals are key gatekeepers.<sup>56</sup> They determine which workers obtain access to employment. Understanding their thought processes, decision-making criteria, and preferences can therefore provide valuable insights into how inequality in the labor market is produced

and reproduced. The interviews both shed light on the meanings hiring agents attribute to different types of employment experiences and assist in understanding the mechanisms underlying the effects that are found in the field experiment.

The individuals who were interviewed held titles such as human resources manager, talent acquisition specialist, and field recruiter. While their exact job responsibilities varied to some extent, all of them were intimately involved in the hiring process. Most of the interview subjects worked to recruit and hire employees for their own companies. Some of them worked at staffing agencies, though, brokering the matching process between their client companies and potential employees. Three respondents had become unemployed within a few months of the interview but were directly involved in the hiring process before their spell of unemployment.

Along with two research assistants, I recruited hiring professionals to the sample through multiple channels, including posting advertisements online about our study.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, we identified companies that were actively hiring through a major, national online job posting board and reached out to them to invite hiring professionals at those companies to participate in the study. We also recruited some participants through referral channels, asking the individuals we interviewed to refer their colleagues to participate in the study. Before our interviews, we asked for respondents' resumes or LinkedIn profiles to ensure that they were an appropriate match for our study—focusing on whether hiring new employees was a central part of their job.<sup>58</sup>

The individuals we interviewed were primarily based in the same five labor markets that are investigated with the field-experimental data in this book. A few of the respondents we spoke with, however, were located outside of these labor markets. In terms of demographic makeup, our sample skews more heavily toward women, in part due to the feminized nature of the human resources profession.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, most of our interview subjects had at least a bachelor's degree, making them quite educated compared to the general population. In terms of race and ethnicity, age, and job tenure, our interview participants are quite diverse. There is also a well-rounded cross-section of industries and company sizes represented among the hiring professionals in the study. However, it is important to note that the interview respondents represent a nonrandom sample of individuals involved in the hiring process and are not representative of hiring professionals in the United States. The characteristics of the individuals who were interviewed for this study and the companies where they work are presented in Table 1.2.

TABLE 1.2. Characteristics of Individuals in the Interview Sample

	Percentage/ <i>M</i>	Frequency/ <i>SD</i>
WOMEN	81.1	43
RACE/ETHNICITY		
White/Caucasian	60.4	32
Black/African American	18.9	10
Hispanic/Latino	15.1	8
Other/multiracial	5.7	3
AGE (YEARS; <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )	41	12
EDUCATION		
Less than bachelor's	11.3	6
Bachelor's	58.5	31
Master's	30.2	16
TENURE AT COMPANY (YEARS; <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )	3.36	4.85
COMPANY SIZE		
2 to 50 employees	17.3	9
51 to 500 employees	38.5	20
501 to 2,000 employees	26.9	14
More than 2,000 employees	17.3	9
INDUSTRY		
Accommodation and food service	9.4	5
Construction	1.9	1
Educational services	3.8	2
Finance and insurance	5.7	3
Health care and social assistance	15.1	8
Information	15.1	8
Manufacturing	5.7	3
Professional, scientific, and technical services	24.5	13
Public administration	7.6	4
Real estate and rental and leasing	3.8	2
Retail trade	7.6	4

*Source:* Interview data with hiring professionals.

*Notes:* Data come from interviews with 53 respondents. Company size is missing for one respondent. Information about most recent employer used for unemployed respondents.

The interviews started with broad questions about the respondents' role at the company and the hiring process where they work. They were asked general questions about what they look for when they are hiring and evaluating job candidates. Then, more specific questions were asked about how they perceive and think about various types of nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment as well as how their evaluations of job applicants may be impacted by someone having previous experience in one of those types of positions. Hiring agents' responses to this line of questioning offer valuable insights into the meanings that are extracted from various employment histories. I also asked whether these evaluations might differ depending on the demographic characteristics of applicants, such as their gender or race.

Toward the end of the interviews, after having discussed their views on various aspects of hiring and employment histories, the hiring professionals were also asked to react to some of the key findings from the field experiment. Their reactions to these findings help to make sense of the field-experimental results and assist in understanding the underlying mechanisms at play in shaping the consequences of nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment histories. Overall, the interview data provide a compelling lens into the thoughts and frameworks from which employers operate and how they think and talk about evaluating job candidates. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed in full, and systematically coded and analyzed using qualitative data analysis software. Additional information about the interviews is available in the Methodological Appendix.

An important thing to keep in mind when engaging with data from interviews with hiring professionals is that what employers say in an interview does not necessarily map exactly onto how they behave when making hiring decisions.<sup>60</sup> They may not be aware of their own biases or how those biases play out. And even if they are aware of their biases, they may not be entirely comfortable discussing them. Interviews are social in nature, and the actors involved care about how they are perceived and how they come across. In the interviews, efforts were made to ensure that the interviewees were comfortable being honest and open, but issues around social desirability bias and other concerns—such as the legal issues surrounding race and gender discrimination—may shape the narratives that I was able to obtain through the interviews. That being said, the interviews help to illustrate the ways that employers conceptualize and attribute meanings to various types of employment experiences. Additionally, they provide powerful data about some of the potential sources that drive the outcomes

seen in the field experiment with regard to the effects of nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious work.

This type of data, in-depth qualitative interviews with employers, is not new in the study of hiring processes. Indeed, an important body of existing scholarship has utilized similar methods to shed light on the hiring process. In particular, two existing books—Philip Moss and Chris Tilly’s *Stories Employers Tell: Race, Skill, and Hiring in America* and Lauren Rivera’s *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*—have laid detailed theoretical and empirical foundations for understanding how employers make hiring decisions. Moss and Tilly focus on the low-skilled urban labor market, while Rivera examines hiring for elite jobs, such as those at investment banks.<sup>61</sup> In the pages that follow, I build on the insights offered in these books about the hiring process. However, I pivot away from these accounts on two significant fronts. First, the hiring professionals in my sample generally hire for mid-tiered jobs, rather than low-skilled or elite positions. Second, the focus of the interviews in this book is on the interpretation and evaluation of different types of employment histories: long-term unemployment, part-time work, temporary agency employment, and skills underutilization.

Critically, the hiring professionals interviewed for this study and the individuals who made the hiring decisions in the field experiment are not the same people. Thus, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the individual decision makers in the two data collection efforts. Yet both samples consist of diverse and heterogeneous groups of individuals who make hiring decisions. Ultimately, by examining both the experimental data and the data from the interviews with hiring professionals, this book provides a holistic picture of how employment histories intersect with demographic characteristics to shape hiring outcomes and highlights the key mechanisms implicated in this process.

## **Overview of the Book**

With broad economic forces changing, many workers feel insecure, and individuals in many cases are kept from building a career and obtaining “good” jobs. But it is unclear whether the evaluation criteria used by employers during the hiring process have kept pace with these changes in the broader economic structure and the ways that workers experience the economy. This is the tension animating the rest of this book, and each of the chapters considers one important part of the equation.

What do we already know about the causes and consequences of nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious work in the new economy? Chapter 2 tackles this question by considering exactly what these categories of employment entail and detailing the changing nature of the broader economy. Key findings from the existing literature—most of which is on the supply side of the labor market—tell us how nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious work experiences shape workers' social and economic lives.

With the necessary background about nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious work established, the balance of the book is organized around three key arguments: (1) employers make meaning—albeit in a complex way—from nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment histories; (2) the consequences of these employment histories are distinct from one another; and (3) identities matter: workers' race and gender are implicated in shaping the consequences of each type of employment history.

What meanings do hiring professionals attribute to nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment histories during the hiring process? Chapter 3 draws on the in-depth interviews to address this question by mapping the terrain of meanings attributed to different employment experiences. Some of the meanings that employers extract from these types of work experiences clearly violate ideal worker norms and lead to negative perceptions of job applicants' soft skills and personality. Alongside these meanings and signals, however, significant uncertainty is induced in hiring professionals when they encounter workers with these types of employment experiences. In reconciling this uncertainty, hiring professionals turn largely to individualized explanation, rather than structural ones, and make it clear that they “need a narrative” from job applicants that explains their employment experiences, a narrative that workers rarely have the opportunity to provide.

What employers say does not always align with what they do. In Chapter 4, I draw on the field-experiment data to directly examine how employers treat workers with histories of full-time work, part-time work, temporary agency employment, skills underutilization, and long-term unemployment. The evidence from the field experiment demonstrates that not all nonstandard, mismatched, and precarious employment experiences have the same consequences. Indeed, the effects are contingent. The interviews with hiring agents help unpack and explain the varied consequences of different types of work histories.

Workers' social identities—their race and gender—matter in shaping how employers respond to workers with nonstandard, mismatched, and

precarious employment experiences. The remainder of the book highlights key cases that illuminate the complex interactions between race, gender, and employment experiences. Chapter 5 aims to understand why part-time work and gender interact with one another in the field experiment. Chapter 6 then turns to how the consequences of long-term unemployment vary with the race of the applicant. Conceptually unifying Chapters 5 and 6 are what I refer to as stratified stories. Building on group-based gender and race stereotypes, hiring professionals deploy narratives about workers' employment histories that produce divergent evaluations of the same employment experience for workers from different social groups.

Stratified stories are also at play, albeit slightly differently, in shaping the ways that temporary help agency experience influences how African American men are treated during the hiring process. Chapter 7 tackles this set of issues. Together, the findings in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 expand our understanding of the ways that social categories—social group membership and experiences in the economy, for example—interact and intersect to produce divergent outcomes for workers.

Where does this all leave us? The concluding chapter, Chapter 8, discusses the broader implications of the findings for theoretical and empirical scholarship on work and employment, social inequality in the workplace, evaluation processes, and the intersection of social categories. This final chapter also articulates key points of interest for policy makers interested in improving the outcomes of working individuals. The book concludes by discussing pathways forward for increasing our knowledge about how the nature of work and employment affect the opportunity structure for workers in the new economy.



*Making the Cut* is about the social and economic opportunity structure—the processes of inclusion and exclusion—for workers in the United States. Obstacles often outside the control of individuals can keep workers stuck in place. To address these challenges and ensure a more broadly distributed opportunity structure that enables workers to attain economic security for themselves and their families, we have to ask a fundamental question: what does it take to make the cut in the new economy?

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