



“Summary of article by Philip Moss and Chris Tilly: ‘Soft’ Skills and Race: An Investigation of Black Men’s Employment Problems” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 4: The Changing Nature of Work. Island Press: Washington DC, 1998. pp. 286-289

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Compared to young white men, young Black men earn a lower hourly wage and have a higher rate of unemployment. These gaps were closing until the mid-1970s, but subsequently began to widen again. Among several other factors associated with these trends are changing skill needs, especially a growing requirement for "soft" or social skills. Defining soft skills as "skills, abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude and behavior rather than to formal or technical knowledge", in 1991 and 1992 the authors conducted 56 face-to-face interviews with employers in four industries in the Detroit and Los Angeles metropolitan areas. The interviews focused on hiring practices relating to entry-level jobs requiring no more than a high school degree. The goal was to investigate "how and why employers formed negative assessments of the soft skills of Black men and why employers sought increased levels of soft skills in entry level jobs." [255]

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS

Performance in service jobs is affected by the worker's ability to relate well to customers. In many other contexts an individual's productivity depends strongly upon relationships with co-workers and with managers. The acquisition of "hard skills" (e.g., reading, arithmetic, and more technical skills) can in some cases be linked to relational skills.

The employers surveyed in this study focussed attention upon two clusters of soft skills. The first category is related to Hochschild's concepts of "emotional labor" [¹], and focuses on the ability to interact with customers, co-workers or supervisors. Interaction involves "friendliness, teamwork, ability to fit in, and appropriate affect, grooming and attire." [256] The second category is motivation, which includes characteristics such as "enthusiasm, positive work attitude, commitment, dependability, and willingness to learn." [256]

The employers surveyed were aware of the growing importance of soft skills, frequently attributing the trend to competitive pressures which are driving up the importance of customer service, quality and teamwork. Most included soft skills on their list of the most important hiring criteria, and almost half put soft skills in the first place on that list. By comparison, the picture was more mixed for hard skills, with some new requirements (such as computer literacy) offset, in part, by occasional comments about the declining need for hard skills (e.g., among sales clerks). The most marked trend was a growing emphasis on customer service and customer relations.

SOFT SKILLS AND RACE IN THE EYES OF EMPLOYERS

The growing emphasis on soft skills disadvantages Black male job applicants. Given that perceptions of soft skills depend upon cultural definitions, employer assessments are liable to be affected by cultural differences and racial stereotyping. Assessment of a potential employee's soft skills (e.g., in a pre-hiring interview) is inevitably subjective, and is therefore an easy conduit for racial discrimination. Most respondents (well over 80% in three of the sectors studied) identified the interview as the most important source of hiring information. The exceptions are public sector agencies, some of which make efforts to downplay interviews or eliminate them altogether, precisely because of the racial bias they can inject into the hiring process.

Employers in the sample who placed "the greatest emphasis on soft skills were those most likely to have negative views of Black men as workers." [260] This assessment by employers may be divided into three parts: stereotype, cultural difference, and accurate perception of the skills of black men.

Employers have formed their perceptions of black men from experiences with employees, applicants, and the media, and from experiences outside work. Some of these attitudes reflect stereotypical views or generalizations from subgroups, such as black men in prison. However, the amount of detail in some responses indicates that some of the negative employer comments were based on real experiences. Other researchers also report that many young black men from inner cities act tough, stressing skills they have developed to survive in dangerous environments. However these behaviors are not likely to be reassuring (indeed, they are not developed to be reassuring) to employers, co-workers and customers.

Regarding interaction with customers or co-workers, employers had two main concerns: Black men were seen as defensive, hostile, or having a bad attitude; and Black men were considered difficult to control and sometimes intimidating to white supervisors. When cultural differences between young Black men and customers, co-workers, or supervisors contributed to problems in interaction, some respondents saw this as a mutual problem, but white respondents were more apt to see it as a failure of young Black men to communicate well. "This conforms with the view expressed in focus groups by young, inner-city, Black and Latino men, that code-switching -- being able to present oneself and communicate in ways acceptable to majority White culture -- is the most important skill needed to find and keep a job." [268]

A large minority of respondents felt that Black men lacked motivation, calling them lazy or irresponsible, and blaming such characteristics for high turnover rates. Many other respondents claimed not to see differences in work ethic between racial groups. However, a substantial majority, whether or not they specifically questioned the work ethic of Blacks, "agreed with the idea that immigrants have a stronger work ethic than native-born workers." [263]

Employers often lumped interaction and motivation together by use of terms such as "attitude," tending to assume that this is innate. Sociologist William Julius Wilson has identified these attitudes as a product of poor neighborhoods. However, several respondents noted that

interaction skills can be taught, while others argued that motivation is in important ways endogenous to the workplace; employees respond to workplace norms, and effective management can foster motivation.

For instance, two Los Angeles warehouses in the same industry in the same Latino neighborhood, but with different management practices and different pay schedules, had very different experiences with turnover, employee attitudes, and gang related problems. The employer with the more productive and stable workforce offered a higher than normal wage, along with rules for employee behavior that were intelligently geared to the need, for example, to downplay gang affiliations.

CONCLUSIONS AND REMEDIES

Competitive pressures are driving the growing demand for soft skills, but since employers often perceive Black men as lacking in these qualities, firm restructuring leads to greater racial inequality. However, public and corporate policies can improve labor market outcomes for Black men. During a recession employers can screen for the skills they need rather than achieving the desired skill mix through training; therefore macroeconomic policies that reduce unemployment will enable more Blacks to be hired. Affirmative action, minority contracting, and community economic development are microlevel programs that can improve job prospects for minorities. "[T]here should be a high payoff to programs that teach code switching to assist inner-city Blacks in bridging the cultural divide with employers." [271]

At the company level, diversity training and management practices that motivate workers can improve the work experiences of young Black men. Several respondents noted that team-based management reduces interaction problems. Minority-owned suppliers, evident in the auto parts industry, are often committed to recruiting in minority communities. Recent initiatives for skills development, particularly from the U.S. Department of Labor, emphasize both the importance of soft skills and the fact that they can be learned.

Additional research is needed to substantiate (or refute) the findings presented here. If they are valid, then more research is needed to understand how employer stereotypes are formed, what real cultural differences exist, how worker or manager retraining can bridge gaps, and how to modify trends to avoid further disadvantages for young Black men.

Notes

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1. See summary, this chapter.