Amazon experimental recruiting engine

IMPLEMENTED 2014–2017 · RETAIL AND HOSPITALITY · US · BAND E · REVERSED
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From 2014 Amazon built an experimental machine-learning tool to score job candidates from one to five stars. Per Reuters, citing five people familiar with the effort, it penalised résumés containing the word "women's" and the team was disbanded by the start of 2017. Amazon declined to comment.

ABOUT THIS SYNOPSIS

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NOTICE WORDING LAST UPDATED 16 NOVEMBER 2026

AT A GLANCE

No measurable effect: withdrawn after a test.

AI used: Experimental machine-learning model that scored job candidates' résumés.

Implemented: 2014–2017. Grade: band E, No measurable effect, Reversed.

Headline result, as reported: Reuters reported in October 2018 that Amazon dropped an experimental résumé-scoring tool that penalised résumés containing the word "women's"

1 · The case

The facts, as reported by the 3 sources listed at the end. Where a source is silent, the field says "Not reported".

Organisation

Amazon.com, Inc.. US online retailer and technology company. The project was an internal experiment by Amazon's machine-learning specialists, reported by Reuters in October 2018. Canvas block: 8. Governance and risk. Also 6. Data and technology, 5. People and skills.

Business challenge

The challenge. Per Reuters, Amazon wanted to mechanise the search for top talent: one engineer said they wanted an engine that would take 100 résumés and return the top five to hire. Amazon's global headcount more than tripled between June 2015 and 2018, per regulatory filings cited by Reuters.

Who implemented it

In-house (In-house): Built the experimental candidate-scoring models, per Reuters's sources.. Any vendor or partner is not reported.

Technology (SEAM pillar E)

SEAM types: T5 Custom / fine-tuned models. Deployment: Not reported. Vendors and products: Experimental candidate-scoring engine (internal).

Where it was built in: An internal tool built by a team in Amazon's Edinburgh engineering hub to review résumés and spot candidates worth recruiting. Per Reuters's sources, recruiters looked at its recommendations but never relied solely on them.

What changed

Before: Amazon was developing a tool to score résumés automatically. After: the project was dropped. Reuters's sources said recruiters had looked at the recommendations but never relied solely on them. Amazon declined to comment on the recruiting engine or its challenges, but said it is committed to workplace diversity and equality. [1] [2] [3]

What it cost

Not reported.

What it saved

Not reported [1] [2] [3]

Governance and control

Reuters reported that the team spotted the problem itself and that the project was stopped rather than relied on. Owner, testing method, and review by Amazon's legal or HR functions: Not reported. Amazon declined to comment.

S2 · Accountable owner · Not reported
Not reported.

A1 · Safe use · Not reported
Not reported.

A2 · Human in the loop · Not reported
Reuters's anonymous sources said recruiters looked at the recommendations but never relied solely on the rankings. Amazon declined to comment. [1]

A3 · Monitoring and assurance · Not reported
Per Reuters's sources, the team found the gender problem by 2015, edited the programs, and disbanded the project as executives lost hope. Amazon declined to comment. [1]

A4 · Vendor AI · Not reported
Not reported.

A5 · Agent controls · Not reported
No agents described.

A6 · Standards and regulation · Not reported
Not reported.

What worked, what did not, what is unproven

WORKED

– Per Reuters's sources, the team identified the gender bias by 2015 and the company stopped the project rather than rely on it.

DID NOT

– Per Reuters's sources, the models learned from mostly male résumés that male candidates were preferable, penalised résumés including the word "women's", and downgraded graduates of two all-women's colleges.

– Editing the programs to neutralise those terms did not guarantee other discriminatory sorting would not emerge.

– Reuters's sources also said data problems led to unqualified candidates being recommended for many jobs, with results close to random.

UNPROVEN

– Whether any candidate was affected: Not reported.

– How far recruiters used the tool: Reuters's sources say they looked at recommendations; Amazon's own account is Not reported.

– Amazon's own account of the project and why it ended: Not reported; it declined to comment.

Timeline

2014 Amazon's machine-learning team begins building programs to review job applicants' résumés [1]

2015 The company realises the system is not rating candidates for technical jobs in a gender-neutral way [1]

2017 Executives lose hope for the project and the team is disbanded by the start of the year [1]

Oct 2018 Reuters reports the project; Amazon declines to comment on the tool [1]

2 · Grade and SEAM assessment

MarLuc's opinion, made on the evidence above. How cases are graded: marluc.co.uk/case-studies/how-we-rate

Level of change and impact

Claimed: Not applicable. Grade: E, No measurable effect. Proof: Reversed. Level of change: Not graded.

No level assessed: band E, withdrawn. An experimental tool was dropped before a reported rollout; no harm, cost or sanction is reported.

Band E, withdrawn: an experimental tool was dropped after the team found it did not rate candidates in a gender-neutral way. No harm, cost or sanction is reported, and the sources say recruiters never relied solely on its rankings. The marker is Reversed because the project was undone; the account rests on anonymous sources.

The SEAM view and lessons learnt

The tool learned from a decade of past applicants, so it learned who had been hired as well as who was qualified. Removing individual terms did not remove the risk. For any larger employer building or buying candidate scoring, the transferable point is to test outputs by protected group before use, and to treat a successful patch of one term as insufficient evidence of fairness.

1. Test candidate scores by sex and other protected traits before any use.
2. Ask what past hiring patterns the training data teaches.
3. Withdraw a tool that cannot be shown to be fair.

Evidence

Score 1 of 4. Independent press report from anonymous sources; no company account, documents or regulator record.

Evaluation method. Press report: Reuters (October 2018), read through CNBC's syndicated copy, the BBC and MIT Technology Review. Original Reuters page could not be opened.

Sources disagree. CNBC's copy of the Reuters report says Amazon declined to comment on the recruiting engine or its challenges. The BBC wrote that Amazon had not responded to the claims. Neither reports an Amazon account of the project.

Status. Closed: project disbanded by the start of 2017, per Reuters. Any later Amazon statement: Not reported.

3 · Original sources

Read these in full. To challenge a fact or a grade, use the contact form at marluc.co.uk or the link on https://marluc.co.uk/case-studies/amazon-experimental-recruiting-engine

[1] CNBC (Reuters report): Amazon scraps a secret A.I. recruiting tool that showed bias against women
https://www.cnbc.com/2018/10/10/amazon-scraps-a-secret-ai-recruiting-tool-that-showed-bias-against-women.html

[2] BBC News: Amazon scrapped 'sexist AI' tool
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-45809919

[3] MIT Technology Review: Amazon ditched AI recruitment software because it was biased against women
https://www.technologyreview.com/2018/10/10/139858/

Amazon.com, Inc. website: https://www.amazon.com

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