Institute for the equality
of women and men

POLICY BRIEF

Recruitment and selection in the age of AI

AI use, awareness of bias risks and recommendations regarding the risks of gender discrimination

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Context

Artificial intelligence (AI) is profoundly transforming recruitment, raising hopes of more efficient, reliable and objective processes, but at the same time raising concerns about the reproduction or amplification of existing biases. Indeed, the European AI Act classifies AI-systems for recruitment as "high-risk systems", requiring special safeguards and attention.

This study examines the use of AI in recruitment and selection processes in Belgium. Its main objective is to analyse recruiters' current practices and assess their awareness of the risks of gender discrimination linked to the use of AI systems. The study is structured around three sub-objectives:

1. Identify the nature and extent of employers'[1] use of AI in recruitment and selection.
2. Assess the extent to which employers using these systems are aware of the risks of gender bias and gender-based discrimination, and how they manage them.
3. Assess the extent to which AI developers consider the risks of gender bias and gender-based discrimination, and whether an internal policy has been established in this respect.
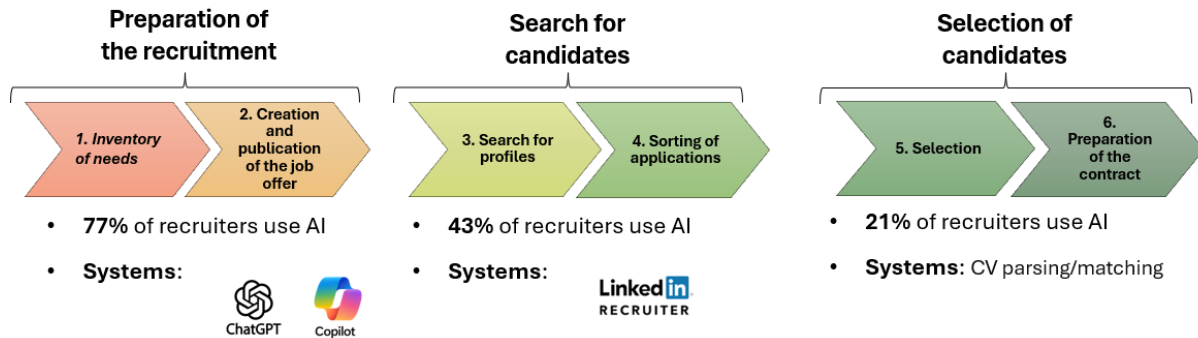
Methodology

The study is based on a mixed approach combining three complementary phases: a qualitative, exploratory phase during which 22 semi-structured interviews (10 in Flanders, 12 in Wallonia) were conducted with AI developers (8 interviews) and HR professionals (14 interviews). This was followed by a quantitative, confirmatory phase during which 416 recruitment professionals (agency recruiters, corporate recruiters, HR directors, managers, etc.), representing various regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels), business sectors and company sizes completed a questionnaire. Finally, there was an in-depth qualitative phase based on focus groups: five sessions with recruiters and experts were held to co-design a set of recommendations.

Main results

Current uses of AI in recruitment and selection

The study revealed that 74% of recruiters use AI in at least one of the three stages of the recruitment and selection process: preparation for recruitment, the search for candidates, and candidate selection. However, this use decreases with each stage. During the recruitment preparation phase (77% use), recruiters mainly use ChatGPT and CoPilot for automated note-taking when defining recruitment needs, drafting job offers and generating interview questions. This phase is where the most widespread use of AI can be observed. During the candidate search phase (43% use), LinkedIn Recruiter dominates AI usage in almost all cases, enabling candidates to be identified automatically, in particular using the feature that suggests compatible profiles. Some recruiters also use marketing tools to automate the process of candidate prospecting. During the selection phase (21% use), it is primarily CV parsing systems (e.g. automatic CV scoring), testing tools (e.g. Hirevue) and tools that assist with note-taking during interviews and report writing that are used. However, there is a more limited use of AI in this phase.

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[1] The term 'employer' used in this study refers to the employer as a structure, e.g. a company, business or association, and not to an individual.

Preparation of the recruitment		Search for candidates		Selection of candidates	
1. Inventory of needs	2. Creation and publication of the job offer	3. Search for profiles	4. Sorting of applications	5. Selection	6. Preparation of the contract

- **77%** of recruiters use AI
- **Systems:** ChatGPT, Copilot

- **43%** of recruiters use AI
- **Systems:** Linked[in] RECRUITER

- **21%** of recruiters use AI
- **Systems:** CV parsing/matching

The study shows that AI is being appropriated to varying extents, with some recruiters making fairly advanced use of the systems, and others just starting to adopt AI in their processes. This differentiation can also be seen in terms of institutional and informal use: the analysis highlights two types of use, namely institutional use via systems provided by the company, and informal, individual use (sometimes referred to as "shadow AI"), where recruiters mobilise tools on their own initiative, without organisational validation. A level of internal differentiation can also be seen: there are sometimes very contrasting opinions and uses relating to AI within the same company. The interviews also demonstrated that the use of AI systems varies depending on the profiles being recruited: AI is used more for high-volume profiles than for specific, niche profiles, where human expertise is still preferred. In summary, AI is currently used as a "super administrative support" by recruiters, and the challenge is to combine this "super administrative support" with the recruiters' own expertise in a responsible manner.

Perceptions and attitudes towards AI

The overall assessment is positive regarding the adoption of AI in recruitment and selection processes: 64% of recruiters are in favour of it (54% somewhat in favour, 10% very much in favour), while only 13% are opposed to it. The main reasons for using AI include saving time on administrative tasks (up to one day a week according to some), speeding up recruitment processes, seeking objectivity in processes, and how easy AI is to use. Arguments relating to performance and efficiency of processes are the most frequently mentioned. Providing personalised communication to candidates is another advantage that was regularly mentioned. AI is also seen by some recruiters as a means of avoiding human bias: many recruiters express the hope that, by standardising the process, systems such as CV parsing will enable candidates to be judged more neutrally.

Despite these hopes and expectations, there are a number of major concerns, starting with the dehumanisation of recruitment and selection processes (loss of human contact). This fear is particularly prevalent among respondents in Wallonia (26%) and less present in Flanders (only 8%). Recruiters also regularly highlighted the risks relating to data confidentiality and the reliability of results. Several recruiters reported cases of "AI hallucination", where completely erroneous results are produced. Some also point out the risks of the reproduction and standardisation of processes, where the same types of candidates (with similar characteristics) are systematically favoured. Recruiters also note that when generative AI is used (e.g. to write job advertisements), the "AI style" is recognisable, and they insist on the need to "rehumanise" what the AI systems produce, particularly when it comes to personalised messages to candidates. The risk of losing out on recruiters' expertise is also often mentioned, particularly in connection with the loss of contextual information (corporate cultures, the nature of teams, experience, etc.) as part of automated processes.

Furthermore, interviews show that recruiters know little about AI legislation (the AI Act, for example) but trust that the systems they use are compliant with legislation. In large companies, specific teams (DPO) oversee the legality of the systems used, while in others "off-the-shelf" products are purchased, often in the belief that they are de facto compliant with current regulations. Only 21% of recruiters questioned through the survey confirm that their organisations have taken action in relation to AI legislation, while 41% do not know what the actual situation is. Several of the organisations surveyed were in the process of drafting AI policies or amending their working regulations at the time of the study, often in response to well-established practices and with a view to making these practices compliant with legal obligations.

For developers, the major issue identified is data storage and control in the context of the increased use of AI. There are several solutions for companies using AI systems: referring to suppliers' policies, running AI internally without external distribution, developing adapted interfaces where the data remains on the company's servers, or guaranteeing data deletion after a specific period of use. Regarding awareness of the AI Act, developers are generally aware of its existence, and consider Europe's firm stance on data management to be positive, despite the risk of this holding back certain developments.

Awareness of the risks of gender bias and discrimination

The objectivity of AI is at the heart of a paradox. On the one hand, many recruiters argue that AI-systems help to mitigate gender stereotypes, thanks to the standardised processing of applications that helps to avoid recruiters' subjectivity. This argument is also put forward by several developers who use the alleged impartiality of AI as a selling point. They argue that this impartiality is justified by the option to easily eliminate protected characteristics (gender, age, origin, etc.) when establishing the parameters of an AI-system. On the other hand, recruiters (and developers) are highlighting various risks of bias related to the use of AI in recruitment and selection processes, both direct (risks linked to the biases contained in the algorithms) and indirect (risk of reproducing human biases on a large scale when using AI).

The study showed that recruiters' perceptions of the risk of bias vary according to the stage of the recruitment process for which AI-systems are used. Among the biases mentioned, gender bias was rarely mentioned spontaneously. However, biases linked to social media (platform algorithms, profile popularity, etc.) were mentioned regularly. Many recruiters are aware that AI systems can easily contribute to reproducing their own biases if they are not careful, particularly in the way they use and question AI (this is also the opinion of developers). Recruiters insist on the danger of capturing and reproducing informal information (managers' unspoken preferences regarding gender, age, origin, etc.). In this context, prompting becomes an essential skill: recruiters say they can manage the risks of gender bias relatively well if they are familiar with inclusive writing. In their view, such reflexes should now be integrated into their professional skills.

However, it is important to remember that not all recruiters are necessarily aware of or able to manage the risks of gender bias. Interestingly, agency recruiters (who make greater use of AI) are more aware of the risks of gender bias (32.2%) than in-house recruiters (14.5%). This appears to be due partly to a generally heightened awareness of the risks of discrimination within temping and recruitment agencies (as a result of training courses, among other factors), and partly to their greater exposure to a wide variety of candidates. Finally, it is important to note that the study revealed no significant difference between men and women regarding perceived risk of bias relating to AI uses in recruitment and selection processes. Our research

shows that there is still a significant amount of work to be done on raising awareness of this subject among recruiters.

Despite this limited awareness of the risks of bias, some recruiters (between 12% and 17%, depending on the stage of the recruitment process) claim that they have already observed that the results produced by AI are indeed biased. Certain automatic searches for specific profiles (e.g. a cleaner) lead AI to select women more often. When writing job offers for these profiles, AI also regularly tends to attribute feminine characteristics to them. A number of recruiters also warn that they believe social media algorithms are not always transparent when it comes to reaching certain target groups, and therefore generate bias. Many recruiters also point out the risks associated with the growing dependence on LinkedIn Recruiter, highlighting both the risk of exclusion (of recruiters and candidates absent from the platform) and the financial dependence (cost of licences) associated with it. They stress the importance of maintaining internal databases and investing in other channels.

Recommendations

The recommendations put forward at the end of the study have been divided into three main categories to cover a broad spectrum of possible actions: the public authority level, the organisational level and the individual level. Here, we propose a selection of key recommendations for each level of action. The complete overview of recommendations is discussed in more detail in the study.

Public authority level

- Study the adequacy of the Belgian legal framework, in combination with the AI Act, to ensure non-discriminatory use of AI.
- Support the development of technical standards integrating gender equality and the prevention of gender and other biases.
- Create documentation and training for developers and users on their obligations regarding non-discrimination when using AI.
- Inform companies about the AI Act and GDPR.
- Create a one-stop shop to support companies in their use of AI integrating non-discrimination aspects.
- Invest in the development of AI-systems in Belgium that help detect bias and support recruitment processes without discrimination.
- Ensure that the authorities responsible for protecting fundamental rights, particularly equality bodies, have sufficient resources to carry out their duties under Article 77 of the AI Act.

Organisational level

For user organisations:

- Create an AI ethics committee.
- Regularly identify the systems used by employees (including shadow AI).
- Involve stakeholders, including worker representatives, in the introduction of high-risk AI systems.
- Set up a monitoring system (Art. 26 AI Act).
- Carry out regular, independent audits to detect biases.
- Keep a record of all automated steps (Art. 12 and 26 AI Act).
- Ensure systematic human supervision (Art. 14 and 26 AI Act).
- Ensure transparency towards candidates (Art. 26 AI Act).

- Use systems to mitigate biases.
- Train staff in inclusive recruitment and cognitive biases applied to AI.
- Develop proficiency in inclusive prompting.

For developer organisations:

- Integrate the "Equality by Design" principle right from the design stage.
- Test algorithms on diversified databases.
- Plan regular post-deployment tests and corrective mechanisms, in collaboration with users.
- Provide clear, easy-to-understand technical documentation (Art. 11 and 13 AI Act), accompanied by training sessions for users.

Individual level (recruiters)

- Formulate requests to an AI-system carefully and use inclusive writing.
- Work on the quality of prompts to limit bias.
- Develop a critical approach to results generated by AI.
- Manually check, compare and adjust analyses.
- Ensure important decisions are still supervised by two people, guaranteeing human intervention.
- Systematically inform candidates about the use of AI at the start of the recruitment procedure.
- Report any discriminatory results from AI-systems to the relevant authorities (market surveillance authorities, trade unions, Institute for the equality of women and men, Unia).

Conclusion

The study highlights a growing but uneven adoption of AI in recruitment, mainly concentrated on the preparatory phases ahead of the process itself. While recruiters recognise the efficiency gains, they have legitimate concerns about dehumanisation, data confidentiality and the risk of discrimination.

Awareness of the risks of gender bias remains insufficient overall, particularly among internal recruiters and in smaller companies. The paradox lies in the fact that AI, perceived as potentially more objective, can in fact reproduce or amplify existing discrimination if it is not rigorously supervised, which is what some recruiters sometimes tend to forget, in favour of a strong belief in the virtues of AI.

In this respect, the results of our study reveal a fundamental tension: on the one hand, the hope that AI can neutralise human bias by standardising processes; on the other, the fear that it will lock organisations into models that reproduce the past, while losing the wealth of contextual information and human creativity that may pick out atypical but relevant candidates.

The recommendations put forward here aim to create a responsible ecosystem combining public regulation, responsibility on the part of developers and user companies, and vigilance on the part of recruitment professionals. The challenge is to make AI a lever for equality rather than a vector for reproducing gender inequalities, in compliance with the legal framework and with a view to continuously improving recruitment practices.

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