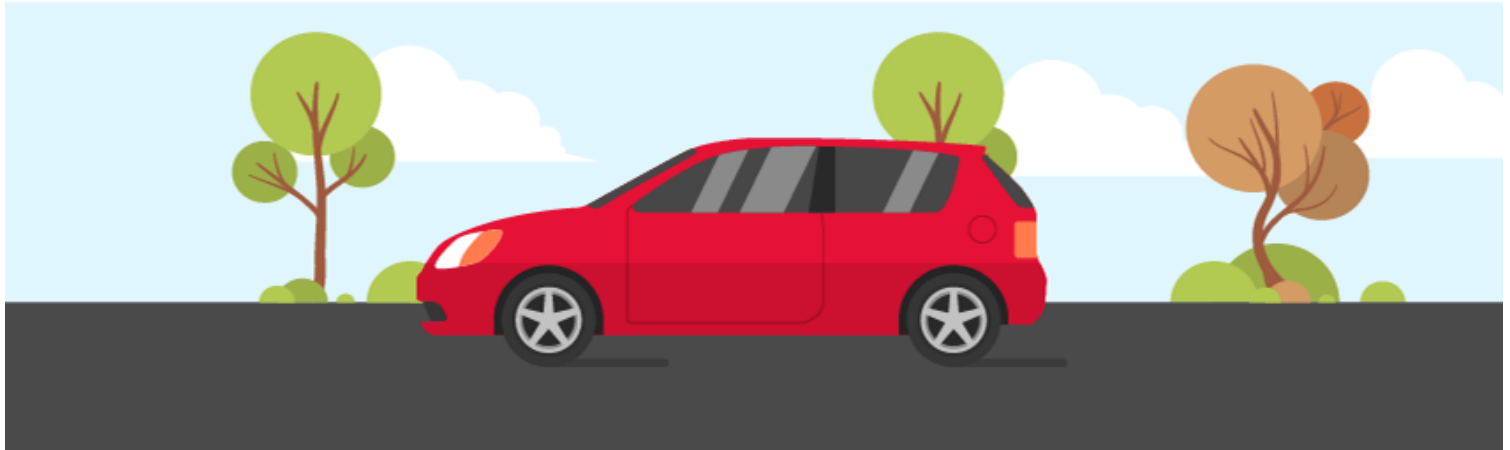


Commuting distance: A new excuse for bias?



HR pros know all about the usual forms of discrimination: race, sex, age, national origin, disability and so forth. Are we about to add another category to the list of characteristics on which bias claims may be based?

A recent study by researchers at the University of Notre Dame found that some employers may discriminate based on how far a job applicant might have to commute.

Of course, that kind of discrimination is not against the law. However, it could be yet another proxy for forms of discrimination that are illegal, such as race or national origin. For example, the Notre Dame study, like others before it, found that having a name that “sounds black” correlates with discriminatory hiring.

The study focused on jobs in Washington, D.C., that required only a high school education. Low-paying jobs in Washington tend to be clustered in a few high-income neighborhoods, while most poor residents live on the other side of the city. Poor Washingtonians, often black, have been priced out of many neighborhoods.

Researchers sent dummy résumés to various employers. All showed the same qualifications, but appeared to come from addresses throughout the city. The study concluded that each mile of commuting distance resulted in an applicant being 1.1% less likely to get a call back.

The Notre Dame researchers can’t say for sure that fewer call-backs equate to race bias. However, the fact that they found a similar correlation with black-sounding names suggests it might.

Advice: Employers can address name bias by masking candidate names on résumés and applications before hiring managers see them. That practice could provide legal cover in case of a bias claim.

Be aware that commuting-distance discrimination might be real, too. Warn hiring managers not to make assumptions about applicants based on where they live. The distance someone has to travel each day is almost never relevant to successful job performance, and it certainly can’t be an excuse to discriminate.