

UCI Paul Merage
School of Business



Research in Action

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RESEARCH IN ACTION

A NOTE FROM THE DEAN

Welcome to the third edition of The Paul Merage School of Business at UC Irvine *Research In Action* publication which contains recent studies published by our world-renowned faculty, as well as feature articles and research summaries exploring topics from social media to tax planning.

Research is one of the many qualities that sets the Merage School apart from other business schools. The caliber of research conducted and the quality of teaching delivered by our faculty are what prepare our graduates for the realities of a constantly changing global business environment.

For full copies of the research highlighted within, or to discuss future research collaboration, visit merage.uci.edu/go/faculty.

Enjoy,



Eric R. Spangenberg
Dean and Professor of Marketing



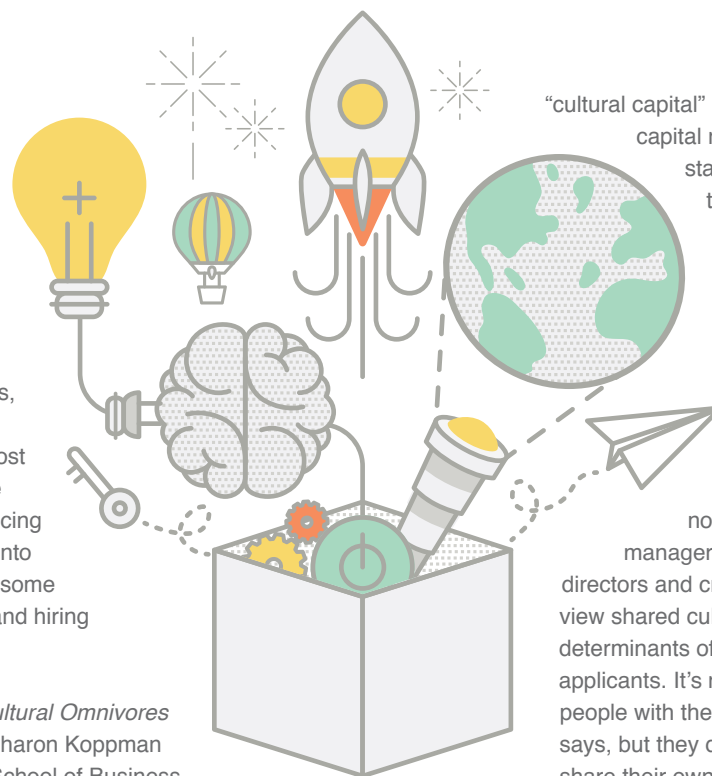
NOT SO DIFFERENT AFTER ALL: SURPRISING TRUTHS ABOUT HOW CREATIVE MINDS GET HIRED

■ *A recent study published in Administrative Science Quarterly suggests that ad agency creative managers are more likely to hire people whose broad interests mirror their own omnivorous cultural tastes. The study brings up questions about diversity in creative workplaces, and reveals more about who gets hired in today's creative environments.*

By Connie Clark

The most successful organizations value diversity of thinking and out-of-the-box solutions, but recruiting creative thinkers has always been a tricky, imprecise science. Advertising agencies, whose key assets are measured in the creativity of their employees, are tasked with identifying this potential in job candidates almost every day. So it follows that the industry responsible for introducing concepts like “Think Different” into the general lexicon might offer some unique insights into recruiting and hiring innovative thinkers.

In *Different Like Me: Why Cultural Omnivores Get Creative Jobs*, Professor Sharon Koppman of the UC Irvine Paul Merage School of Business, studied ad agency hiring practices, examining the role



“cultural capital” plays in the process. “Cultural capital refers to widely shared, high-status cultural signals, such as tastes, cultural interests and styles, which can be used to access economic rewards such as desirable jobs and salaries,” she notes.

Koppman points out that the people who do the hiring in ad agency creative departments are not usually human resources managers. Instead they’re writers, art directors and creative directors who often view shared cultural experiences as determinants of creativity among job applicants. It’s not that creative bosses hire people with the same interests, Koppman says, but they do tend to seek out those who share their own proclivity for a broad field of interests—cultural omnivores.

◀ **Sharon Koppman**, Assistant Professor of Organization & Management

Let's say two candidates with similar experience and work portfolios are searching for an agency job. One mentions in interviews that she studied opera in college, enjoys bluegrass music, and does pin weaving in her spare time. The other candidate has few interests outside of advertising to discuss. That diversity of interests will serve the first candidate well, as 75 percent of ad agency creative managers consider it a marker for creativity, outranking their interest in candidates' interpersonal skills (27 percent) and presentation skills (44 percent).

Put another way, Koppman says that for a creative candidate with the most omnivorous taste possible (for example, someone who might like heavy metal, opera, rap, new age, and Latin music), the odds of creative employment in an agency are more than six times greater than they are for a candidate with the least omnivorous taste possible (for example, someone who likes only contemporary rock).

Koppman cautions these cultural cues can be misleading for creative managers. "Reliance on this signal actually goes against much of what we know about creative careers: that success requires extensive and deliberate practice, that production depends on collectives of individuals with specialized skills, and that creative producers who specialize are more employable." And, while a long list of cultural activities can signal intellectual curiosity, she adds that it can also suggest a scattered attention span or indecision.



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But more significant Koppman says, is the resulting lack of diversity the practice fosters. "Evaluators unconsciously choose people who are similar to them socioeconomically, because cultural omnivores tend to be from privileged class backgrounds." So, she says, more of the same people get hired. "Employers go out looking to hire someone 'new' and 'different'—essentially, 'creative'—and they come back with someone who is new and different in exactly the same way they are." She adds, "The explicit search for 'difference' actually produces a rather homogeneous workforce."

Even more revealing is that on the "creative" side of agencies (as opposed to account service, media and business affairs) only 18 percent of employees come from working class backgrounds, and only six percent are non-white. Men outrank women, who comprise only about one-third of creative departments. This lack of diversity is striking, Koppman says. "So much of the research on organizational creativity

emphasizes the need for diversity, specifically the way creative insights come from integrating diverse viewpoints. Here, we have a group of people who call themselves 'creatives' and explicitly look for 'difference' when hiring employees but the way they evaluate 'difference' ends up rewarding similarity and reproducing the status quo."

Koppman acknowledges that there are no hard and fast tests that objectively determine whether candidates will fulfill their creative potential, and she refers to contrasting hiring practices at companies like Google, where it's reported that recruiters are interested in candidates' deep knowledge of particular subjects, rather than their many outside interests.

Still, ad agencies defend the practice of seeking out people with similar omnivorous cultural interests, citing robust



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intellectual curiosity as a necessary skill. Said one of the hiring respondents, “It doesn’t matter, a copywriter or designer...a lot of times the first questions I will ask are, ‘Do you read? What do you like to do in your own time? What are your hobbies?’”

Because you can tell a lot about someone by the activities they pursue in their spare time. It’s a good indicator of their intellectual curiosity.” The respondent adds, “If you were to look at the books I’m reading they are all over the place because I want to know about everything.”

Still, Koppman offers a word of caution to any organization seeking out-of-the box thinkers. “Employers need to be aware that even when they think they are selecting employees explicitly for their ‘difference,’ our unconscious tendency to like people who are like us prevails.”



Sharon Koppman is an assistant professor of Organization & Management at the UC Irvine Paul Merage School of Business. Her research examines the work of culture and the culture of work. She studies the work of culture by investigating career and employment processes in cultural and creative fields. She studies the culture of work by analyzing how culture is used as a resource in the workplace. Professor Koppman’s research has appeared in *The Sociological Quarterly*; *Poetics*; *Science, Technology & Human Values*; *Information Technology & People*; *Research in the Sociology of Work*; and *Lecture Notes in Computer Science*. ■