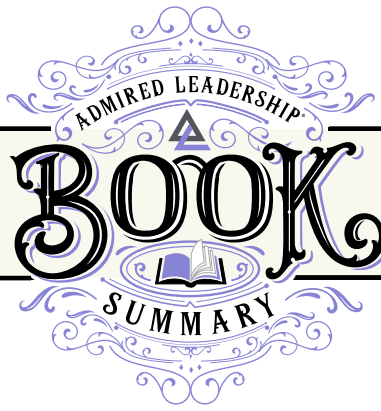




Eight Minutes, Not Eight Hours



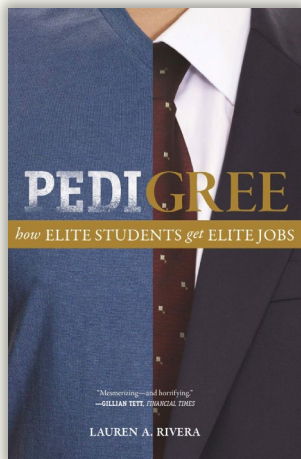
July 2025

# Pedigree

How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs

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Published 2015



Author Lauren Rivera embedded herself in the recruiting office of an unnamed Elite Professional Services (EPS) Organization as part of a study on how EPS firms recruit and assess entry-level candidates. As a recruiting associate assigned to an elite University (pseudonym: Eastmore), and through access granted by other participants, Rivera observed all stages of the assessment process and records her observations on selection in financial services, consulting, and prestigious law firms. She paid particular attention to the mechanisms that consciously or unconsciously reinforce homogenous workforces by giving

advantage to applications with similar socioeconomic, racial, gender, cultural or sexual orientations.

## KEY QUOTE

*“Employers sought new hires who were not only capable colleagues, but also fun and exciting playmates. They distrusted résumés and often privileged their personal feelings of comfort, validation, and excitement experiences during face-to-face interviews over identifying candidates with superior cognitive or technical skills” (p. 270).*

## KEY POINTS AND CONCEPTS

### Main Findings

There is little consensus on the qualities that EPS firms should be looking for in assessing candidates. Where there is agreement, the calibration is mostly subjective, and plays to the advantage of candidates similar to interviewers. This reinforces the homogeneity of the firms’ workforces.

There is a strong focus on interpersonal fit in the assessment process. While many interviewers attribute this to the fact that long work hours require teams that get along socially, some admit that interpersonal fit is easier to “feel” in an interview.


EPS firms overwhelmingly prefer graduates of elite Universities and graduate programs—not because they believe that the schooling prepared candidates for work, but because they believe in those Universities' ability to select the best candidates. According to recruiters, as an example, you don't need to go to Harvard, but you do need to have gotten in [i.e.: EPS firms are not confident in their ability to assess talent, so they effectively outsource the assessment to elite universities].

EPS firms focused their recruiting—and recruiting budget—at a few “target and core” universities because they believed the concentration of qualified candidates were highest. Target and core schools were schools with elite reputations, or the alma maters of the current Management Team.


Because EPS firms are looking for the “best and the brightest” and see themselves as competing with other firms, recruiting programs spare no expenses in exposing candidates to the luxuries of the “baller lifestyle.” While this is an effective strategy for attracting candidates, it can attract candidates without real passion for the work itself, and it produces a social atmosphere where upper class applicants feel more at home.

The most scrutiny of candidates occurs in relatively unstructured interviews, and the research shows that the self-narratives that interviewers find most compelling in interviews are ones most native to upper classes and members of Western cultures.

Rivera also points out that while HR and recruiting professionals are the team members that receive the most training on interview techniques, their opinions are devalued by business leaders. “Drawing attention to the stigma of HR in these firms is important because academic models of hiring frequently assume that HR professionals bear the responsibility for making hiring decisions. This assumption did not hold in the firms that I studied. Instead, revenue-generating professionals—who are often difficult to identify using organizational websites, industry directories, or national databases that sociologists rely on to gather information about hiring agents—evaluated candidates and made decisions” (p. 25).



**“There is a strong focus on interpersonal fit in the assessment process. While many interviewers attribute this to the fact that long work hours require teams that get along socially, some admit that interpersonal fit is easier to “feel” in an interview.”**



### **1. There is little consensus on the qualities that EPS firms should be looking for in assessing candidates.**

There was little consistency in how résumé screeners evaluated candidates. Most spent only a minute or two on screening, and many ignored the cover letter altogether. The three most common criteria were school prestige, extracurricular activities, grades, and employment prestige. Rivera goes on to explain that all but one of these criteria (grades) are biased against diversity applicants (pp. 84-85).

“Although interviewers knew what types of applicants their firms expected them to select—bright, motivated, socially skilled young adults who would be good fits with the firm—it was up to each

evaluator to devise ways of interpreting and measuring those qualities. In the absence of systematic guidelines, interviewers relied on their own beliefs about what constitutes merit and how best to recognize it [...] these conceptions of worth tended to be derived from and validate interviewer's own upbringings, life trajectories, and identities" (p. 135).

In investment banking, analytical tests were meant to be weighed as heavily as fit, but in practice, candidates were given more or less leeway on their analytical performance based on perception of fit and demographic stereotypes. Women—except Asian women—were held to higher standards on quantitative tests and were less likely than men to make up for shortcomings in math with their perceived polish and general intelligence (pp. 188-192).

## **2. There is a strong focus on interpersonal fit in the assessment process.**

While firms looked for intelligent candidates, they preferred someone who fit culturally with the firm, and described assessing the candidates' extracurricular activities for clues that they would make good friends (pp. 94-95).

"[Employers] sought new hires who were not only capable colleagues, but also fun and exciting playmates. They distrusted résumés and often privileged their personal feelings of comfort, validation, and excitement experiences during face-to-face interviews over identifying candidates with superior cognitive or technical skills" (p. 270).


While management scholars define fit as a combination of shared values and personality traits that enhance the organization's productivity, "evaluators in my sample defined and measured fit in a different way. Interviewers sought similarity in play styles—how applicants preferred to conduct themselves outside of the office—rather than in their work styles or job skills" (p. 136).

Candidates who had "champions," either by referrals—from classmates or those connected to the firm—or from interviewers were more likely to get passed to the next round of assessment.


"I find that institutionalized and individual social capital set the bounds of competition. Students either needed to attend a university with pre-existing ties to a firm, or have an insider contact within a firm or industry (both of which are strongly associated with parental socioeconomic status) in order to have their applications considered" (p. 26).

A candidate's social skill and "polish"—communication skills and grooming—were critical in all face-to-face assessments.

While fit is arguably important for client-facing roles, Rivera's research found that fit was weighed most heavily in law, which has the least interpersonal demands in junior roles. Consulting, which has the most interpersonal interaction, weighed fit the least. [Note: Fit was weighed less when interviewers had structured technical questions and case studies, suggesting that interviewers concentrate on fit because they don't know how else to assess candidates] (p. 142).



**"Candidates who had "champions," either by referrals—from classmates or those connected to the firm—or from interviewers were more likely to get passed to the next round of assessment."**



“For consulting firms, the case interview provided a crucial analytical counterbalance to the more subjective, interpersonal evaluative criteria of cultural fit, polish, and drive common across industries. Poor case performance typically disqualified candidates from progressing any further. Yet stellar case performance was not sufficient to fully offset red flags regarding negative personal qualities, such as arrogance or lack of fit” (p. 199).

### **3. EPS firms overwhelmingly prefer graduates of elite Universities and graduate programs.**


“So part of the reason we only recruit at those schools [...] is because they’ve done two-thirds of the work for us” (p. 36).

Seeing another EPS firm on a candidate’s résumé normally acted as a signal that they were capable of the work [Note: this implies that they place as much faith in their competitor’s ability to assess talent than their own]. However, in one typical case, two similar candidates, one man and one woman, had both done rather poorly in quantitative testing. While the evaluators decided that the man’s experience at the other firm was enough to lift him over the threshold, they asked each other about the woman, “How did she ever get a job at [that great bank]? Someone clearly messed up on that one!” (p. 229).


### **4. Firms focus on “target” and “core” schools.**

Recruiters at target schools tend to speak of recruiting events as business development, as even declined candidates may be future clients. However, at diversity fairs, recruiters tend to speak of events as marketing opportunities, as the primary value of the event is creating a reputation that the firm cares about diversity, even if the fairs rarely result in actual hires (pp. 40-45).

The narrow conception of target schools creates a myth that qualified diverse candidates are rare. “Firms are scrambling for diversity. They want gender diversity, racial diversity, you name it, and [they] go to great lengths to attract diverse applicants. They are all fighting for the same tiny piece of the pie. But they are focusing on that slice rather than expanding it, which is the real problem” (p. 44).



**“Firms appeal to students’ uncertainty about life after graduation and their competitiveness by presenting jobs in EPS firms as the most logical, secure, and prestigious career path available to elite grads.”**



### **5. Recruiting programs spare no expenses in exposing candidates to the luxuries of the “baller lifestyle.”**

“While on campus, these employers not only advertise jobs and interview applicants but also shape students’ perceptions of desirable and undesirable careers and lifestyles [...] a vital part of on-campus recruiting for EPS firms involves socializing students into a particular idea of what it means to be elite” (p. 272).

“Firms appeal to students’ uncertainty about life after graduation and their competitiveness by presenting jobs in EPS firms as the most logical, secure, and prestigious career path available to elite grads” (p. 26).

“Some research indicates that elite students may be more likely than their less elite counterparts to want to leave their jobs soon after starting [...] They argue that students at the most elite schools are socialized to believe that they are the best and the brightest, and they deserve high-status, well-compensated, intellectually fulfilling, and enjoyable jobs. These aspirations, however, clash with the relatively routine nature of entry-level work in finance, consulting, and law firms” (p. 41).

“[Recruiters who wine and dine students on campus] tap into our competitiveness...knowing that if we are offered opportunities to build our résumés, we won’t just apply, but we’ll commit ourselves so fully that we’ll mistake our desire to win the race with a desire for what we’re chasing” (p. 75).

#### **6. The self-narratives that interviewers find most compelling are ones most native to upper-classes and members of Western cultures.**

“Artful storytelling about one’s experiences is awarded greater weight than one’s actual experiences (enumerated on résumés) in job interviews” (p. 150).

“The types of activities, stories, experiences, and answers valued in interview settings are deeply entrenched in class-based definitions of self, success, and personal style” (pp. 26-27).

**The narratives that evaluators preferred had strong socioeconomic dimensions (p. 154):**

- **Presuming that candidates had choices (e.g., to attend elite universities or take unpaid internships)**
- **Assuming that choosing schools and work experience based on self-actualization is an option realistic to all candidates**
- **Not understanding that individuals of high socioeconomic backgrounds tend to see their experiences as a product of discrete choices, while those of lower-class backgrounds tend to see their experiences as the result of external forces**

Interviewers were more willing to consider candidates outside the norm tended to be from diverse backgrounds themselves, either coming from non-target schools, or other cultures or demographics.

“Two types of narrative content tended to ‘move’ or ‘wow’ evaluators: stories that were similar to evaluator’s personal biographies and those that were highly vivid” (p. 155).

#### **Other verbatims and advice from interviewers:**

On being motivated outside of work: “So great, you like skiing, but tell me that you make it a point to go twenty times a year or you enjoy playing chess, but tell me that you go to tournaments or that you go to Central Park and play twice a week or something like that. So something beyond just the interest, but show me that...you’ve actually taken something and decided to pursue it” (p. 98).

One interviewer joked, “I don’t even need to look [at the résumés]. I can tell by their faces! [...] We should just measure their skulls” (p. 129).



**“Interviewers were more willing to consider candidates outside the norm tended to be from diverse backgrounds themselves, either coming from non-target schools, or other cultures or demographics.”**



"I like people who I want to spend time with. It's not fair, but you can't avoid it" (p. 135).

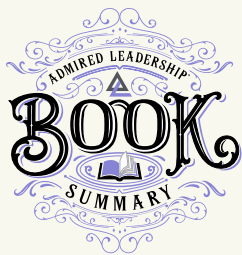
"The fact that [candidates] do well through a recruiting process doesn't necessarily mean that they're going to be good in their job. The fact is that something like 30 to 40 percent of the people that are hired, within two to three years are gone, either self-selection or otherwise. And so that means that it's not a terribly successful process" (p. 139).

On narratives that excite interviewers: "This one guy I interviewed listed something about high-stakes dice rolling on his résumé. I was like, 'Awesome!' But he couldn't get me excited about it. Here was a really interesting tidbit that could have been really fun to talk about, but he just couldn't get me excited or wow me with it" (p. 155).

"During calibrations [meetings where two interviewers reach consensus on a candidate], I witnessed how quickly consensus formed around the very top and bottom of the list; stellar or abysmal candidates received very little attention. The goal of calibrations was consensus, not vetting." Candidates who were "mixed reads" received the most attention. The difference between a candidate who received a callback or not was usually whether one of the interviewers was willing to champion the candidate's cause. Interviewers were most likely to champion for candidates who reminded them of themselves (p. 221).

"A lot of things have to have gone right in your life...to be competitive for this job. Exponentially more things had to have gone right if you're from an underrepresented background" (p. 267).

Rivera, L.A. (2015) **Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs:**  
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.



***"A lot of things have to have gone right in your life...to be competitive for this job. Exponentially more things had to have gone right if you're from an underrepresented background."***

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