The Algorithm Missed Me

Why AI Hiring is Broken
And How **leveld** Fixes It

A White Paper by Tony Rossi

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The playing field, leveled.

Executive Summary

I have 23 years in cybersecurity. 21 of those years with the U.S. Navy Pacific Submarine Force, protecting some of the most sensitive systems in the Department of Defense. I hold CISSP, CISM, and CEH certifications. I have a Master's degree and I'm completing a PhD. I maintain an active TS/SCI clearance.

And I can't get a callback.

Applications submitted at 2 PM get rejected by 2:03 PM. Recruiters who reached out to me go silent after I apply through their portal. Positions I'm overqualified for never generate an interview.

I'm not alone. According to Harvard Business School, **27 million Americans are "hidden workers,"** qualified candidates systematically filtered out by algorithmic hiring systems before any human sees their application. 88% of employers admit their own AI tools reject qualified candidates.

This isn't a personal complaint. It's a market failure. And it's the reason I'm building **leveld**.

The Problem

AI hiring tools optimize for keyword matching, credential checkboxes, and pattern recognition trained on historically biased data. They systematically exclude veterans, career changers, caregivers returning to work, self-taught professionals, and anyone whose story doesn't fit a neat algorithmic box.

The Opportunity

The HR technology market exceeds $30 billion. Employers spend billions on tools that, by their own admission, reject the people they need. Meanwhile, they report "talent shortages" while qualified candidates disappear into digital black holes.

The Solution

leveld is a hiring platform for people the algorithm missed. We verify candidate stories through demonstrated capability, validated experience, and verified credentials-**proof over polish**. We're starting with cybersecurity because we know the industry, and because the best security professionals rarely have linear resumes.

This white paper presents the research behind the problem **leveld** solves, the legal and regulatory landscape creating urgency for change, and the market opportunity for employers and candidates ready to fix hiring.

About the Author

Tony Rossi is a cybersecurity professional with 23 years of experience, including 21 years with the U.S. Navy Pacific Submarine Force. He most recently served as a DoD Compliance Program Manager and holds CISSP, CISM, and CEH certifications with an active TS/SCI clearance. Tony is completing a PhD in Cyber Leadership at Capitol Technology University.

Tony founded **leveld** after experiencing firsthand how algorithmic hiring systems filter out qualified candidates. His military-to-civilian transition-and ongoing job search despite exceptional credentials-revealed a systemic failure that affects millions of Americans.

The Research

The Scale of Exclusion

Automated recruiting systems reject qualified candidates at scale, with **88% of employers acknowledging their own AI tools screen out skilled workers**. A landmark Harvard Business School study found 27 million Americans are "hidden workers"-unemployed or underemployed despite being qualified-largely because algorithmic screening eliminates them before any human sees their application.

The stakes are enormous. With 99% of Fortune 500 companies using applicant tracking systems and 68% of businesses worldwide now deploying AI in hiring, these algorithmic gatekeepers touch virtually every job seeker. Recent federal court rulings allowing discrimination lawsuits against AI vendors, combined with mounting academic evidence of racial, gender, and disability bias in these systems, suggest the industry faces a reckoning.

Documented Bias Patterns

The most comprehensive evidence of AI hiring discrimination comes from an October 2024 University of Washington study that tested three leading large language models across 554 resumes and more than 3 million comparisons. The findings were stark:

- White-associated names were favored **85% of the time** compared to Black-associated names at just 8.6%

- Male names were preferred 51.9% of the time versus female names at 11.1%

- Black male-associated names were **never preferred** over white male names in any comparison

Disability bias presents equally serious concerns. A 2024 study found that GPT-4 consistently ranked resumes with disability-related credentials lower than identical resumes without them. The AI produced both direct ableism and indirect ableism-drawing irrelevant conclusions from disability mentions. For example, resumes listing autism-related leadership awards were critiqued for "less emphasis on leadership roles"-the exact opposite of what the credential demonstrated.

The foundational Harvard Business School "Hidden Workers" study quantified the problem's scale:

- 88% of employers admit their ATS screens out qualified, high-skilled candidates
- 94% of executives acknowledged filtering out candidates who could have succeeded
- 50% of companies automatically eliminate applicants with employment gaps exceeding six months
- Companies hiring hidden workers are 36% less likely to face talent shortages

Legal Liability Landscape

The legal landscape shifted dramatically with Mobley v. Workday, now certified as a collective action that may include "hundreds of millions" of affected applicants. Plaintiff Derek Mobley alleges he applied to more than 100 jobs using Workday's platform and was rejected every time-sometimes within minutes, including at 1:50 a.m. when no human could have reviewed his application.

In July 2024, the court issued a landmark ruling allowing the case to proceed under a theory that Workday acts as an "agent" of employers under anti-discrimination law. Judge Rita Lin wrote that "*drawing an artificial distinction between software decisionmakers and human decisionmakers would potentially gut anti-discrimination laws in the modern era.*" Discovery revealed Workday's software rejected **1.1 billion applications**.

Other significant legal actions include:

- **iTutorGroup EEOC settlement ($365,000):** The company programmed its system to automatically reject female applicants 55+ and male applicants 60+. This marked the EEOC's first settlement involving algorithmic hiring discrimination.
- **ACLU v. Intuit/HireVue (March 2025):** A deaf Indigenous woman was denied human-generated captioning and received AI feedback suggesting she "practice active listening"-offensive to a deaf applicant.
- **CVS settlement (July 2024):** HireVue's video interviews tracked facial expressions to assign "employability scores," violating Massachusetts's lie detector statute.

Regulatory Environment

NYC Local Law 144 became the first U.S. law specifically regulating AI hiring tools (enforcement began July 2023). It requires annual independent bias audits, public posting of results, and 10-day advance notice to candidates before AI evaluation. However, compliance has been dismal - a 2024 study found only 18 of 391 employers posted required audit reports.

The **EU AI Act** (effective August 2024) classifies all AI hiring systems as **high-risk**, requiring comprehensive risk management, human oversight, and registration.

Non-compliance penalties reach €15 million or 3% of worldwide turnover. Full obligations apply August 2026.

U.S. state laws are creating a patchwork:

Jurisdiction	Key Requirement	Effective
Colorado	Impact assessments, pre-decision notices, AG reporting	June 2026
Illinois	Notice/consent for AI video; HB 3773 prohibits discriminatory AI	2020/2026
California	FEHA regulations make AI vendors liable as employer "agents"	Oct 2025
Maryland	Consent required for facial recognition in interviews	Oct 2020

The EEOC issued guidance in 2022-2023 explaining how the four-fifths rule applies to AI tools and clarifying that employers remain liable for vendor-provided systems.

The Talent Paradox

The adoption numbers are staggering: 97.8% of Fortune 500 companies use detectable applicant tracking systems, 67% of organizations use AI in recruitment (up 189% since 2022), and 82% plan ATS with AI integration within five years.

Verified statistics are troubling:

- Only **2% of CVs** reach hiring managers past initial screening
- 72% of CVs are never seen by human eyes
- ~70% of companies allow AI to reject candidates without any human oversight
- Applications per hire have increased 182% since 2021

The fundamental paradox: 69% of employers report difficulty finding qualified candidates, while 88% of employers admit their own systems reject qualified applicants.

The human cost extends beyond rejected applications. 77% of job seekers have been ghosted by potential employers. 55% identify "waiting to hear back" as their biggest contributor to job search mental health challenges. 79% report heightened anxiety about the job market.

Vendor Counter-Arguments

Vendors offer several defenses. They claim 63% of recruiters report AI helps eliminate human bias by evaluating resumes objectively. CodeSignal's CEO claims female candidates experience "up to 39% fairer treatment with AI compared to human evaluators." SHRM reports one-third of HR professionals say diversity improved with AI use.

However, these claims face substantial challenges:

- **Training data limitations:** As Brookings Institution researchers note, "If an employer has never hired a candidate from a historically Black college, would an algorithm know how to evaluate such candidates effectively?" Systems trained on historically biased hiring decisions reproduce those patterns.

- **Automation bias:** When AI reinforces existing biases, humans follow along. A study of 528 participants found that when AI recommendations were biased, humans selected majority-white candidates 90.4% of the time, suggesting human oversight doesn't correct algorithmic bias when reviewers trust the machine.

- **Vendor opacity:** A Brookings survey of 18 algorithmic screening vendors found "the industry rarely discloses details about its methods or the mechanisms by which it aims to achieve an unbiased assessment."

The Amazon case remains the canonical cautionary tale. The company spent years developing an AI recruiting tool trained on 10 years of resumes. It learned to systematically downgrade women's CVs, penalizing resumes containing "women's" (as in "women's chess club captain") and downgrading graduates of all-women's colleges. Amazon scrapped the project after failing to eliminate the bias.

Implications

The core question - whether AI recruiting software is "ruining the job market" - requires nuance. The technology creates genuine efficiency gains that employers value. But the evidence shows it simultaneously:

1. **Systematically excludes** qualified candidates through arbitrary criteria (employment gaps, exact keyword matches, degree requirements)

2. **Perpetuates and amplifies** historical biases against women, racial minorities, people with disabilities, and intersectional groups

3. **Operates without meaningful transparency** about methods, validation, or outcomes

4. **Creates negative feedback loops** where human reviewers defer to biased AI recommendations

5. **Harms candidate mental health** through ghosting, automation, and dehumanization

The legal and regulatory response is accelerating. The Mobley ruling establishing AI vendor liability may fundamentally reshape incentives. The EU AI Act's high-risk classification will force compliance changes for global companies. State laws are proliferating.

Conclusion

The evidence strongly supports the thesis that AI hiring tools are systematically filtering out qualified candidates and creating substantial barriers in the job market. The 27 million hidden workers, the 88% of employers who admit their own tools reject qualified people, the 0% rate at which LLMs preferred Black male names over white male names-these aren't anomalies but predictable outcomes of systems optimized for efficiency over equity.

"Companies don't recognize the costs of their current inflexible hiring practices, which are riddled with bias." - Professor Joseph Fuller, Harvard Business School

Whether these systems are "ruining" the job market depends on perspective. For employers, they reduce costs and processing time. For the 27 million hidden workers, the

77% of candidates ghosted by automated systems, and the qualified applicants rejected by algorithms at 1:50 a.m., the answer is considerably less ambiguous.

The Market Opportunity

The research is clear: AI hiring tools create systematic exclusion at scale. But this isn't just a social problem-it's a market failure that creates opportunity.

The Addressable Market

Segment	Size
Global HR Technology Market	$32.6B
U.S. Recruiting Software Market	$3.2B
Cybersecurity Hiring (U.S.)	750,000+ open positions
Estimated "Hidden Workers" (U.S.)	**27 million**

The Employer Pain Point: 69% of employers report difficulty finding qualified candidates. 88% admit their own systems reject qualified candidates. Employers are spending billions on tools that filter out the people they need. They know it's happening-but they lack alternatives.

The Timing

Legal and regulatory pressure is accelerating:

- *Mobley v. Workday* established AI vendor liability for discrimination

- NYC Local Law 144 requires bias audits, with more jurisdictions following

- EU AI Act classifies all hiring AI as "high-risk" (full compliance August 2026)

- EEOC enforcement and state-level laws are proliferating

Companies need solutions that reduce discrimination liability while actually finding qualified candidates. The window for market entry is now.

Why Cybersecurity First

leveld launches in cybersecurity for strategic reasons:

1. **We know the industry.** Our founding team has decades of combined experience in security operations, compliance, and workforce development.

2. **The talent crisis is acute.** 750,000+ unfilled positions in the U.S. alone, with employers claiming they can't find qualified people while algorithms reject veterans, career changers, and self-taught professionals.

3. **Non-linear paths are the norm.** The best penetration testers, incident responders, and security architects rarely have traditional backgrounds.

4. **Proof is measurable.** Cybersecurity skills can be validated through certifications, lab demonstrations, CTF performance, and verified project work.

5. **The community is tight.** Cybersecurity professionals talk. Early success creates rapid word-of-mouth adoption.

From cybersecurity, **leveld** expands to adjacent technical fields (IT, software development, data science) and eventually any industry where the algorithm systematically fails.

Why leveld

The Problem with Current Solutions

Today's hiring platforms fall into two categories:

- **Traditional ATS/AI Screening:** Workday, Greenhouse, Lever, HireVue. Optimized for efficiency, trained on historical hiring data, systematically biased. These are the systems creating the problem.

- **Job Boards:** LinkedIn, Indeed, ZipRecruiter. High volume, low signal. Candidates blast applications; employers drown in noise. No verification, no differentiation.

Neither solves the core problem: How do you find qualified candidates whose stories don't fit algorithmic patterns?

leveld's Approach: Proof Over Polish

leveld verifies candidate stories through demonstrated capability, not keyword matching.

For Candidates

- Profile your actual experience-including non-linear paths, military transitions, career changes

- Verify credentials through authoritative sources (certifications, clearances, education)

- Demonstrate capability through validated projects, lab environments, CTF scores

- Tell your story in context-the algorithm sees gaps; we see resilience

- **You pay nothing. Ever.** All verification costs covered by employer subscriptions.

For Employers

- Access pre-verified candidates with demonstrated skills

- Reduce discrimination liability with auditable, bias-tested matching

- Find the "hidden workers" your current tools filter out

- Meet SLA requirements or face accountability-we protect candidate time

- Pay for seats, not candidate access-candidates are not the product

The Differentiator

Traditional AI Hiring	leveld
Keyword matching	Capability verification
Pattern recognition (biased)	Story-in-context evaluation
Filters out non-linear paths	Designed for non-linear paths
Black-box algorithms	Transparent matching criteria
Creates legal liability	Reduces legal liability
Candidates are the product	Candidates are protected

Business Model

leveld operates on an employer subscription model:

- **Employer subscriptions:** Monthly per-seat access to verified candidate pool

- **Verification included:** Background checks, credential verification, skills assessment-covered by subscription

- **Candidates pay $0:** No subscription fees, no verification fees, no "boost your profile" upsells

Call to Action

For Employers

If you're struggling to fill cybersecurity roles-while your ATS rejects candidates you'd want to hire-**leveld** offers a different approach.

Pilot program (limited availability):

- Early access to verified candidate pool

- Reduced fees during beta period

- Input on feature development

- "Founding Employer" badge and case study participation

Contact: tony@leveld.io

For Candidates

If the algorithm missed you-if you're qualified but invisible to automated systems-**leveld** is being built for you.

What you get:

- A platform that values proof over polish

- Verification that costs you nothing

- Employers held accountable to respond

- Your data protected-never sold

- A voice in how hiring should work

Join the waitlist: leveld.io

The playing field was rigged.

We leveled it.

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