Max Paradox

THE BRUTAL TRUTH SERIES

The Brutal Truth About People Judged by Machines

How Automated Screening Changes What We Consider Talent and Merit



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INTRO

At 8:17 a.m., Anna received a message informing her that her application had been rejected. There was nothing particularly unusual about that. She had submitted her résumé three days earlier, applying for a team manager position at a company whose name she had known for years. She had fourteen years of professional experience, had managed teams of more than a dozen people, and had been responsible for budgets, recruitment, and sales performance. In her previous job, she had been promoted twice. Her manager considered her one of the most independent people in the organization. This time, however, she did not even make it to a telephone interview. The system politely informed her that her profile did not meet the criteria for further consideration. There was no name attached to the decision, no explanation she could challenge, and no person she could contact to ask what had gone wrong. There was only a notification assuring her that the process had been conducted in accordance with established standards.

Anna read the message again, as though a second attempt might reveal something beyond the carefully formatted rejection. Perhaps a specific word had been missing from her description of previous experience. Perhaps the system had failed to recognize a position that carried a different title at her former company. Perhaps she had forgotten to select a particular competency in the application form, despite having performed that very function for the previous six years. She did not know. After all, the company had not rejected her following an interview, an examination of her achievements, or a comparison

between her experience and the team's actual needs. In a sense, she had not even been rejected by a particular person. She had been eliminated by a procedure whose internal workings she neither knew nor had any access to.

This is a fictional illustrative scene, constructed to demonstrate a mechanism rather than document the experience of a particular candidate. Yet recognizing the situation requires very little imagination. Decisions affecting human beings are increasingly enclosed within interfaces, while responsibility for those decisions becomes distributed among software, regulations, parameters, and organizational structures. Modern recruitment is only one of the places where this approach to evaluation is gaining importance. Similar processes appear in the allocation of tasks, the prioritization of customer service, performance assessments, access to training, and opportunities for promotion. Increasingly, a person finds themselves standing before a system that first attempts to convert their experience into a collection of data points, only later allowing someone to consider what those data points actually mean.

Automated screening offers organizations an extremely attractive advantage: it allows them to believe that evaluation can be separated from human weaknesses. A manager may be tired, a recruiter may have prejudices, and a supervisor may favor people who resemble them. A machine appears to be free of such problems. It has no favorite candidates, does not arrive late for meetings, does not forget the selection criteria, and does not need a coffee break after conducting its fourth interview. Furthermore, it can process more applications than any human being could reasonably read within a limited period. From a company's

perspective, this is a difficult argument to dismiss, particularly when the number of applications is increasing, recruitment budgets are shrinking, and senior management expects the process to become faster, cheaper, and easier to report on.

There is, however, a subtle shift in meaning hidden inside this promise. Objectivity begins to be equated with consistency, and consistency with correctness. If a system applies identical criteria to everyone, it may appear to treat everyone fairly. Yet applying a criterion consistently does not necessarily mean that the criterion itself accurately describes a person's value. An algorithm may consistently favor certain types of experience, particular vocabulary, specific educational backgrounds, or achievements that are easy to measure. Its consistency does not establish whether those are actually the qualities that should determine who receives an opportunity.

Consider two candidates. The first has spent ten years working for one large organization, earning promotions, attending formal training programs, and performing responsibilities that correspond neatly to official job descriptions. The second has moved between industries, taken on significant responsibilities in small companies, dealt with crises that nobody had thought to include in a procedure, and acquired skills outside officially recognized development pathways. The first has an orderly professional history that can easily be presented in an application form. The second has experience that requires explanation. If a system is better at recognizing what has already been named, organized, and documented, it may consider the first candidate more suitable, even when the actual usefulness of

both individuals depends on entirely different circumstances.

This does not mean that every human evaluator would recognize the value of the second candidate. They might just as easily reject that person because of their own prejudices, impatience, or attachment to familiar patterns. The difference is that a human being can be asked to justify a decision, confronted with additional information, or forced to acknowledge that something is not understood. A system can also be monitored and corrected, but that does not happen automatically simply because it operates on data. Behind its construction are earlier human decisions: what was considered important, which outcomes were treated as success, which characteristics were described, and which were left outside the model altogether.

The machine does not invent a definition of talent from nothing. It inherits definitions that an organization already possesses and then gives them a technical form. What was previously a recruiter's preference can become a scoring criterion. What was once a manager's habit can be recorded as the profile of a successful employee. What a company knows how to measure begins to look more real than what it cannot describe. The ability to resolve conflicts may be replaced by the number of completed communication training courses. The ability to lead people may give way to productivity indicators. Experience acquired under difficult circumstances may lose to experience that fits more comfortably into the vocabulary of an application form.

The behavior of the people being evaluated changes as well. A candidate no longer simply describes what they can do. They begin describing themselves in a way that makes them recognizable to the tool. An employee no longer

considers only whether a task was performed well, but also whether the result will be visible in the system. A manager learns to talk about their team in the language of indicators because that is precisely the language that appears in reports and presentations. Over time, people adjust not only the way they present their achievements, but also their understanding of which achievements matter in the first place.

An unusual inequality begins to emerge. Someone who performs their work exceptionally well but cannot translate that work into the appropriate categories may appear less valuable than someone who is better at managing their own visibility. This is not always a matter of dishonesty. Sometimes it is simply an adaptation to rules established by the organization itself. People quickly discover that invisible effort has limited administrative value, while a result that cannot be assigned to the correct field barely exists within the official account of their work.

The most interesting question, therefore, is not whether a machine can evaluate people. A much more uncomfortable question is what organizations begin to consider worthy of evaluation once they acquire the ability to process human beings as data. Automation does not have to take away every opportunity from an individual. It is enough to shift the boundary between what gets noticed and what disappears inside the process. Talent does not vanish, but the way it is recognized changes. Merit does not cease to exist, but increasingly it must take a form that the system is capable of reading.

A person's value remains considerably more complicated than the score generated by any model. Nevertheless, that very score may determine their place within an organization

before anyone bothers to ask for their perspective. In such a world, the machine does not need to know who the person being evaluated really is. It is enough for the institution to decide that its answer is sufficient.

Chapter 1 - The Person Who Didn't Fit in the Table

Five names appeared on the conference room screen. Beside each one were columns showing scores, experience, competencies, and predicted suitability for the position. The department manager sat with his arms folded, the recruiter was reviewing her notes, and the operations director was trying to bring the meeting to an end before his next video conference. The choice should have been straightforward. The system had identified two candidates whose profiles best matched the requirements. The first had a high competency match, while the second scored slightly lower but stood out for having a stable employment history. The third candidate, who had previously managed a similar team and was known as someone capable of pulling organizations out of difficult situations, appeared at the bottom of the ranking. The director looked at the results and said there was no point complicating the process. After all, the system had analyzed everyone according to the same rules.

As with other situations presented in this book, this scene is intended to illustrate a mechanism rather than describe a documented case. What matters is that nobody had to say the third candidate was incompetent. It was enough that he had failed to achieve the required score. His experience had not been explicitly questioned, his achievements had not been challenged, and his competencies had not been declared worthless. They had simply been placed lower in a hierarchy that the organization had accepted as reliable. This is a considerably more convenient way of rejecting a person because it does not require anyone to formulate a

specific accusation. All that is needed is a reference to the result of a calculation.

Automated screening does not begin by asking who a person is. It begins by asking which characteristics can be assigned to a candidate and subsequently compared with those of other candidates. This may seem like a relatively small distinction, but it changes the entire nature of the evaluation. Talent is a broad phenomenon, dependent on circumstances, experience, relationships with other people, and the conditions under which someone performs their work. A person can be an excellent specialist in a team that requires independence and an average performer in an environment demanding strict compliance. Someone may possess the ability to solve problems that only becomes apparent when established procedures stop working. Another person may achieve outstanding results thanks to resources that others simply do not have. None of these differences is particularly unusual. The problem begins when they have to fit into a collection of fixed categories.

An organization needs comparability because making decisions without a common language can be time-consuming and vulnerable to disputes. When five candidates are assessed by several recruiters, criteria that can be applied consistently to everyone are useful. Education, length of service, knowledge of specific tools, employment history, sales results, or the number of people previously managed all appear suitable. They are concrete, relatively easy to record, and make it possible to create rankings. They introduce order into a process that might previously have depended on the personal preferences of the person conducting the interview. This is not an imaginary benefit. Standardization can reduce randomness and make decisions

easier to monitor. The difficulty arises when the tool becomes the primary means of defining value and the convenience of measurement begins to take over the actual purpose of evaluation.

Imagine two people applying for a management position. The first has spent eight years working for a large company, managing a team of twenty people and participating in several formal development programs. The second has spent six years leading a smaller team in a business without extensive organizational structures or a dedicated training department. During that time, this person took responsibility for reorganizing work, reducing the number of customer complaints, and replacing their supervisor during periods of absence. The first candidate has more impressive information in the standard fields of an application form. The second has a professional history that needs to be explained because their most important achievements were never recorded in the form of formal certificates or program titles.

The system does not need to know which of them would perform better in the new position. It is enough for it to assess their compatibility with a profile constructed from characteristics considered relevant. If the size of a previously managed team carries considerable weight, the first candidate will have an advantage. If formal training is treated as a strong indicator of managerial readiness, that advantage may increase. From the algorithm's perspective, this is not prejudice against the second candidate. It is the outcome of the assigned weightings. From the organization's perspective, it may even be justified if the company genuinely needs someone with experience managing a large structure. However, if team size is merely a convenient approximation of competence, the organization

may confuse the scale of a previous position with the actual ability to perform a new job.

This is where a subtle substitution of concepts takes place. Instead of asking about talent, organizations ask about its indicators. Instead of evaluating merit, they evaluate the elements intended to represent it. Using indicators is not inherently a mistake. The problem emerges when their usefulness is no longer open to discussion and their results begin to function as direct descriptions of human beings. The number of years of experience may say something about exposure to particular responsibilities, but it does not automatically reveal how well someone handled them. The number of completed training courses provides information about participation in an educational process, but it does not establish whether the knowledge was ever applied. An indicator can be useful and incomplete at the same time. Within organizational decision-making, these two statements are often reduced to one: the result is sufficient.

This becomes particularly visible in positions whose real value emerges under unusual circumstances. A manager may achieve average numerical results for most of the month because they have inherited a team following a period of high employee turnover, staffing shortages, and customer conflicts. At the same time, another manager may record impressive productivity while working with an experienced team, efficient support resources, and a stable customer base. The table can identify a clear winner. It may not reveal how much work was required to keep the first team functioning well enough to continue operating, or how heavily the second manager's results depended on more favorable conditions. A common measurement provides a

comparison, but it does not necessarily provide a fair interpretation.

Companies particularly value data that can be attributed to specific individuals. Sales figures, the number of completed tasks, service times, contract values, and target achievement rates all make it possible to establish who delivered a particular result. They are less effective at recording work that involves preventing problems, supporting colleagues, and maintaining cooperation. An employee who spends an hour helping a new colleague may complete fewer personal assignments. A manager who intervenes in a conflict may lose time that could otherwise have been devoted to achieving targets. An experienced specialist who checks the work of a junior colleague may not increase their own performance score, even though their involvement prevents the entire team from making an expensive mistake. In reports, such behavior may look like a decline in productivity. In reality, it may be one of the reasons the organization avoids much greater losses.

Automation strengthens the importance of what is visible in the data because a system needs information on which to operate. If an organization does not record the quality of cooperation, it is difficult to expect an algorithm to include it in an assessment. If the level of task difficulty is not documented, the system cannot easily distinguish between results achieved under different conditions. If the cost of employee turnover is not measured, it may reward individuals who achieve good results at the expense of excessive pressure on their teams. This is not evidence that machines are inherently unfair. It is evidence that their representation of reality depends on what people previously decided was worth recording. The organization passes its

own limitations to the tool and then receives them back in a more orderly form.

A situation might therefore arise in which the best employee according to an algorithm is someone who regularly completes the largest number of tasks. Their colleague completes fewer tasks but handles the most difficult cases, which other employees are reluctant to accept. A third person helps onboard new team members and takes over responsibilities when others are absent. Each contributes a different kind of value, but the ranking system may reduce all three contributions to a common scale. The person with the highest score receives a bonus and is presented as a model of efficiency. The others notice that their work carries less significance in the organization's official account of performance. After some time, difficult assignments become less attractive, helping colleagues begins to look like a loss of personal productivity, and onboarding new employees is no longer treated as a particularly valuable contribution. Everyone starts paying closer attention to their own results.

This does not have to be a conscious decision to abandon cooperation. People respond to what an organization rewards because rewards and evaluations influence employment security, salary levels, and future opportunities. If a system consistently favors one type of activity, employees may conclude that other activities are less important, even if they were previously part of their professional identity. Cooperation is gradually moved from the category of responsibility into the category of private generosity. Helping someone else begins to depend on whether it will damage one's own statistics. Relationships become more cautious, and trust acquires an additional layer

of calculation. A person can still be a good colleague, but their willingness to help now competes with the result that will eventually be evaluated.

An even more serious problem emerges when an indicator begins to influence the kind of experience an employee acquires in the first place. Someone hoping for a promotion may choose assignments that produce measurable results rather than responsibilities requiring long-term commitment without an immediate payoff. A manager may concentrate on improving the parameters that the system considers most important while postponing issues that are harder to measure. Over time, it is not merely the evaluation of work that becomes dependent on indicators. The work itself is reorganized to produce those indicators. The organization receives increasingly large amounts of data that correspond to its model and progressively less information about activities the model does not recognize.

This produces a particular form of professional adaptation. Employees begin describing their achievements in the language of the system, managers adjust priorities to match evaluation criteria, and recruiters search for people resembling those who previously received high scores. Each participant may be acting rationally within their own circumstances. The candidate wants a job, the manager wants to achieve targets, the recruiter wants to reduce the number of unsuccessful decisions, and senior management wants to compare results. There does not necessarily have to be a single malicious intention behind this arrangement. There is, however, a shared interest in maintaining a system that allows a matter to be closed quickly and a result to be identified. The costs of this convenience are distributed

unevenly. Someone whose talent is difficult to record loses an opportunity. Someone whose work remains invisible to the indicators loses recognition. The organization, meanwhile, may lose competencies it has never learned to recognize.

It is also important to understand that results do not have to be false to lead to incorrect decisions. The candidate with the highest score may genuinely be very good. The employee with the highest productivity may genuinely perform outstanding work. The problem is not that numbers always lie. It is that they answer questions someone previously decided to ask. If the question is who completed the largest number of tasks, the result may be precise. If the organization then uses that result to determine who the best employee is, it moves from measurement into interpretation. This transition often goes unnoticed because the calculation gives the entire decision the appearance of technical necessity.

Back in the conference room, the director eventually approves the candidate with the highest score. The recruiter records the decision, and the department manager returns to their daily responsibilities. Nobody needs to feel that anything unfair has just happened. The process was completed, the criteria were applied, and the documentation is in order. The third candidate will not receive the position, but the organization does not even have to remember that their experience was different. The system will retain a score that can later serve as a reference point for future recruitment processes. Over time, there will be more and more such results, and the organization will begin treating their consistency as confirmation that it has chosen the correct definition of talent.

A person's value is thus shifted from the area of actual ability into the area of ability recognized by an accepted model. This shift is particularly convenient for those making decisions because it allows them to separate responsibility for the choice from responsibility for the criteria behind it. The director does not have to explain why one type of experience is valued more highly than another. They can simply point to the ranking. The recruiter does not have to explain every uncertainty because the process has an established threshold. The organization does not have to settle the question of what talent means in all its complexity. It only needs to establish how it will measure it. This is precisely when a table stops being a tool for organizing information and begins to function as a definition of the human being it is supposed to describe.

Chapter 2 - The Words That Open Doors

Marek was sitting in front of his laptop on Sunday evening, revising a résumé that he had considered perfectly adequate only a week earlier. The job advertisement was two pages long, while his CV was just under three. Over more than a dozen years, he had gained experience in sales, conducted negotiations, onboarded new employees, analyzed performance, and managed relationships with key customers. At his previous company, his position had been called Regional Sales Manager. The new advertisement was looking for a Regional Sales Performance Lead. The responsibilities were similar, although the terminology was different. Marek copied the requirements into a document and began comparing them with his CV. He found words he had never used before: stakeholder management, performance optimization, cross-functional collaboration, data-driven decision making. He knew what they meant. What he did not know was whether he should include them, given that he had spent years performing the corresponding tasks without ever describing them in those terms.

After an hour, his CV looked different. His experience remained exactly the same, but the descriptions of his positions had changed almost completely. Negotiating contracts had become stakeholder relationship management, improving team results had become performance optimization, and cooperating with the logistics department had become cross-functional coordination. Marek had not invented a new job or fabricated achievements. He had translated his professional history into the language of the advertisement. He did this because he knew that his document might first reach a program that did

not understand experience in the same way a human being did. He therefore had to make sure his competencies could be recognized before anyone decided to evaluate them.

In this situation, the mechanism differs from the simple selection of evaluation criteria. The candidate is no longer merely the subject of assessment. They become an active participant in a process that attempts to anticipate how the tool operates and adapt their own presentation accordingly. Automated screening creates a new form of professional communication in which it is not enough to know how to do something. It also matters whether a person can describe that ability using words recognized by the system. An application document stops being merely a summary of professional experience. It also becomes an attempt to match language to a technical method of classification.

Marek is not being dishonest in this scene. His behavior follows from the conditions he has come to understand by observing recruitment practices. He knows that even good experience may not be sufficient if it is not presented appropriately. Sending out a CV involves a cost for him. Every application requires time, while the absence of a response provides no way of determining whether the problem was his competencies, the competition, the company's expectations, or the way the document was interpreted. Adjusting his vocabulary gives him at least a sense of influence over the process. He can change the wording, check its compatibility with the advertisement, and send another version. This is a modest psychological benefit, but under conditions of uncertainty it may be enough to make him repeat the same ritual.

Professional vocabulary has never been a neutral description of work. Every industry develops its own names,

abbreviations, and concepts that make it possible to recognize particular competencies. An employee who has spent years managing sales may perform tasks similar to those of someone working in business development, although the two titles do not always mean exactly the same thing. A project management specialist may use different language from someone coordinating similar undertakings in a small company without holding a formal title. Differences in vocabulary do not necessarily indicate differences in ability. However, when selection takes place through document analysis, vocabulary can become one of the main sources of information about a candidate.

As a consequence, people with similar experience may be evaluated differently simply because their previous organizations used different terminology. A candidate from an international corporation is familiar with the language frequently appearing in job advertisements because they have spent years working in an environment built around similar concepts. A candidate from a smaller company may describe the same activity in ordinary language that is perfectly understandable to a human being but less compatible with the system's vocabulary. One person will write that they managed stakeholders and coordinated the implementation of strategic initiatives. Another will write that they agreed on tasks with several departments and made sure the project was completed. If the tool searches for particular terms, the first document may appear to be a better match, even though the activities being described may be comparable.

This difference is particularly significant for people changing industries. Someone who has worked in customer service may possess competencies useful in sales,

relationship management, or the analysis of user experience. However, the language used to describe their previous responsibilities may not correspond to the terminology of the new sector. A production employee who organized shift operations and resolved operational problems may have experience closely related to some of the responsibilities of an operations manager. If their position had a local title and their duties were described in straightforward language, the system may fail to recognize the similarity. A person reading the CV might notice the connection after a few additional sentences. An algorithm may require more explicit signals.

Candidates therefore begin performing work that was not previously included in the formal description of the application process. They do not simply present their professional history. They translate it into the language of the potential evaluation system. They must guess which expressions will matter, how individual competencies should be named, and which parts of their experience deserve greater emphasis. At the same time, they do not receive complete information about how the tool actually works. They know the job advertisement, see the application form, and sometimes hear that the company uses automated screening. The rest is reconstructed from observation and advice circulating online. Recruitment begins to resemble communication with a recipient whose expectations must be anticipated, even though nobody knows precisely how that recipient interprets the message.

A market for advice on optimizing CVs for recruitment systems begins to emerge. Candidates learn that certain document formats are easier to read, that complicated graphic layouts should be avoided, and that particular words should appear in specific sections. In many cases, such