



RISING STARS

THE NEUROSCIENTIST USING AI TO LEVEL THE RECRUITING FIELD



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Because you don't have to be a neuroscientist to know discriminatory hiring is real.

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By Zara Stone

THE DAILY DOSE AUG 11 2017

Join Frida Polli and other thought leaders and compelling speakers to explore The Future of Work at Stanford on August 30.

Whatever you do, don't call Frida Polli a cute science girl. Sure, she's a slim blonde with baby blue eyes, but this New York-based neuroscientist's been up since 5:30 a.m., tasked with running Pymetrics, the startup she co-founded that blends artificial intelligence with neuroscience to reframe the hiring process. Instead of recruiters battling their unconscious biases when sorting résumés, applicants are directed to complete a series of cognitive games that map out their personality traits and suggest career trajectories — think of it as a love child of Tinder and LinkedIn. Polli's motivation was to improve diversity in hiring and give people greater opportunity — needs that played out in vivid terms during her fundraising rounds. “In a business competition, we were the only startup that had revenue, and they called us the cute science girls,” she says. “There were many times we were discounted.”

Race and gender discrimination in hiring is not a new problem. A 2014 study showed African-Americans were 16 percent less likely to get called in for interviews, and 79.8 percent of Fortune 500 board seats are held by white men. But implementing change is hard. Today, the American recruiting industry's annual revenue stands around \$28 billion, and a high number of hires come from in-house referrals — basically, white dudes suggesting other white dudes. Bringing neuroscience into the mix is one way to level that playing field, letting companies widen their candidate pool while sourcing specific skill sets — helpful for that all-important culture fit. Psychometric testing is not a new concept, but today's batch of tests differ because they integrate AI, using machine learning to help both sides of the table.

“When I started, I thought this was a crazy idea,” Polli says. “I'm 38, I'm a single mom, I don't fit Mark Zuckerberg's profile.” Prior to Pymetrics, she studied neuroscience at Harvard Medical School and MIT before joining up with Julie Yoo, a former MIT peer, to launch Pymetrics in 2013.



Frida Polli at Pymetrics HQ, where game design is used to remove bias from the hiring process.

SOURCE TOM KUBIK FOR OZY

Her original plan wasn't to build a diversity tool but to make the assessment system less biased, which ended up being the same thing. "There are historical biases baked into the current assessment models against women and minorities," Polli says. Ideally, AI can fix that, though she's aware that some warn predictive AI could kill jobs; she counters that it can also highlight talent shortages and suggest new paths of employment.

POLLI DOESN'T TAKE OFFENSE AT THE FEEDBACK SHE RECEIVED EARLY ON ... SHE VIEWS IT AS EXTRA VALIDATION FOR WHY PYMETRICS IS NEEDED.

Polli's average day is hard to describe as she's always on the go, but the one constant is the **copious amount of coffee** she drinks each day. As a parent of two, she's regularly asked about juggling motherhood with her career, questions she dismisses as inherently sexist — after all, do men get asked that? She did, however, write a *Forbes* article called “Sleepless in Silicon Alley: Being a Mom and a Startup CEO,” in which she said, “Being a mom makes having a startup harder and easier.” In an early investor meeting with BBG Ventures, a well-known women-run fund, Polli brought her 6-year-old daughter to the meeting because she couldn't find a sitter — which charmed CEO Susan Lyne and partner Nisha Dua, who brought her into their portfolio. Today, they're some of Polli's role models — something her Pymetrics colleague, Jessica Barrett, VP of business development, says about her.

Barrett finds Polli a colorful person to be around, literally. “I don't know if I've ever seen her wear black,” she says. A Google image search confirms that bright colors are Polli's standard attire — she's pictured in forest greens, blues and pinks. She calls Polli's leadership style “hands-off with support” and appreciates being allowed to seek her own solutions to problems — with Polli always on hand if she needs input.

But not everyone is sold on the benefit of psychometric tests, AI notwithstanding. In her book *The Cult of Personality Testing*, science writer Annie Murphy Paul calls tests “often invalid, unreliable and unfair,” and Roger Dooley, neuromarketing expert and author of *Brainfluence*, says he's unfamiliar with these types of tests. “It looks interesting, but I'd like to see the data showing that the tests really are effective at predicting job performance,” he said via email. User feedback is also mixed — often skewing negative on forums. “I got an email about 10 minutes after finishing, telling me I had automatically been turned down from the position and will be unable to apply [for a job here] for 12 months,” a Redditor wrote, regarding a role at Unilever.

Polli's aware that some kinks need to be worked out and tells me that her plan for growth includes targeting unemployed communities and helping pull them into the workforce. She's just received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to work on this initiative.



Frida Polli, CEO, neuroscientist, mom and fan of colorful clothes.

SOURCE TOM KUBIK FOR OZY

Talking to Polli, it's hard to believe early investors told her she needed to show more confidence in her pitching — her voice is clear, measured, and her answers are thoughtful. But those haters are likely gnashing their teeth now: Pymetrics has raised \$8.63 million as of December 2016, with over 500,000 people taking their online games and hundreds of colleges and companies such as Unilever and Rent the Runway signed up. Tests are 100 percent free for users, and companies regularly pay between six and seven figures to recruit through Pymetrics.

Looking back, Polli doesn't take offense at the feedback she received early on; instead, she views it as extra validation for why Pymetrics is needed. "I'm not aggressive in my presentation style," she says. "What these [investors] were reflecting is that I don't come across in a male stereotypical format — which, to them, means this person lacks confidence. That's why we need tech to remove these biases."

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