



H A R V A R D | B U S I N E S S | S C H O O L

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6/30/17

Dean Paul Healy  
% Faculty Administration, Morgan Hall T25  
Harvard Business School  
Boston, MA 02163

Dear Paul:

I am writing in response to your request for my assessment of the work of Professor Ben Edelman, who is being considered for promotion to Full Professor with tenure. I last wrote a letter regarding Ben Edelman on 7/18/15, and this letter is amended from that letter (including the use of full sentences/paragraphs from that letter). The majority of the new material in this letter starts on page 3.

Ben is brilliant, productive, has great motivations, and is changing our world for the good. I completely and enthusiastically support this promotion.

My work is not close to Ben's work. But, I have read about half of his publications, frequently talk to Ben about his research and many other issues, and find Ben to be an amazing intellectual resource for me and for the school. I learn a tremendous amount due to Ben's knowledge and brilliance.

Ben is a new breed of internet social scientist, who organizes data in ways that could not have been conceived of a decade ago to answer fundamental questions facing the new economy. He uses his knowledge of the law, economics, computer science, and his massive knowledge of institutional details. His approaches are novel, logical, and compelling. But, perhaps what I value the most is that Ben is motivated to make the world a better place through his work. He wants to use his unusual combination of talents to improve the welfare of society – whether through teaching, research, providing evidence if bad corporate behavior, or suing people who are engaging in bad behaviors.

While Ben's work is different, he accomplishes his objectives through means that are valued at HBS. He publishes in leading journals. His 2007 American Economic Review paper is a classic paper in the field. His publication record since 2014 is extraordinary, with many papers in very top journals. He writes cases, and loves doing so. He is enthusiastic about conveying his knowledge to others, whether it is his MBA students,

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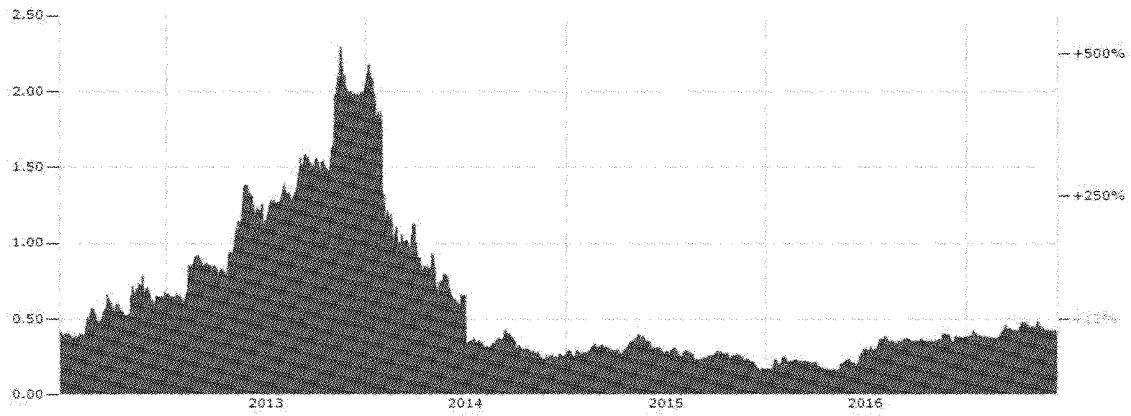
executive students, or his faculty colleagues. He has an enormous following in the professional/managerial community, and he is providing them with truly new knowledge. And, Ben is always happy to jump on an airplane to help policy makers change our institutions for the better. Quite simply, Ben is amazing.

I have carefully reviewed Ben's personal statement, and think that the research and teaching statements accurately represent Ben's work. I have no need to re-summarize what Ben wrote – I simply endorse it. But, I think that Ben sells himself short on service. Across my 35-40 years (depending on how you count) in academia, I have never seen an untenured faculty member who provided so much benefit to his colleagues and his school. Ask anyone in NOM, and they will tell you stories of sitting in Ben's office as he solved some internet problem for them, or found them a travel solution that they could have never found on their own – typically a solution that travel professionals couldn't find. In the process, Ben has saved HBS tens of thousands of dollars.

Ben also creates value by thinking about systems – e.g., legal, computer support, internet, purchasing – at HBS and at Harvard more broadly that could be better, and tells people what he knows. Many people are bothered by Ben when they first run into his ideas (I know I was). But, when you stop and listen, you realize that Ben is almost always right. He has little sympathy for tradition or the fact that changing standard practices is needed. When he sees waste and inefficiency, he wants to fix it. He is quick to realize that many processes were institutionalized long ago for reasons that have little relevance today. Too often, his ideas are discounted because of some political agenda, and that is too bad – we all lose as a result.

I have also spent a great deal of time following the “Ben controversies”. Ben has created controversies within HBS, and I firmly believe that we benefit as a result. Ben's visions of the future are usually improvements on the current state, and he is willing to put forth the effort to implement his ideas. I think that all (including Ben) agree that the Chinese restaurant story was not handled ideally. But, it is also important that Ben was acting out of principle, that he was correct in his accusations, and that the restauranteur had been engaging in the same fraud in an intentional manner for multiple years.

Similarly, some are concerned about the Blinkx episode. Ben publicly accused Blinkx of fraudulent behavior, and Blinkx's stock price tumbled as a result. I personally think that short sellers play an important function in monitoring the market. HBS should certainly consider changes to our policies regarding the conflict of interest possibilities in the case. But, all evidence, including the lack of a bounce back by Blinkx, following the January, 2014 decline (caused by Ben), suggests that Ben's assessment is likely to have been right on the mark (the chart below provides Blinkx stock price over time, with the large crash attributed to Ben's accusations):



Two years ago, I was of the opinion that Ben should have been promoted to Full Professor with tenure, and I had extremely positive views of Ben's integrity and honesty. Ben's behavior and productivity over the last two years simply enhances my conclusion from two years ago.

I am personally involved in research on the question of how to improve behavior (honesty, non-discriminatory behavior, etc.) in the online economy. Thus, I am stunned by Ben's many contributions to both identify bad behavior, and developing solutions to correct those behaviors. One of his most recent contributions is Edelman, Luca, and Svirsky (2017). Although just recently published, this paper is quickly becoming one of the best known papers in the social science of discrimination and a role model for how to think about discrimination in the online economy. The empirical work is clever, the implications are fascinating, and this paper is already changing the way the online economy works. Their result that African Americans are discriminated against in the Airbnb market leads to very clear policy recommendation, and has changed Airbnb's behavior in profound and visible ways – even though they are far short of what Ben would push Airbnb to do.

In the past year, I also had the opportunity to visit Ben's LCA course, and was amazed by his ability to relate to the class, bring his own expertise to bear, and create a truly unique learning experience. If I was ever to teach LCA, I would want to learn from Ben's insights in this class.

Finally, Ben's prosocial behavior to help colleagues continues. The best example that I have recently observed is his software development to help a vision impaired colleague who lacks peripheral vision. Ben worked with her to devise a system so that she can see the names of all students who virtually raise their hands on the screen in the middle of the classroom. I have observed this colleague teach with this technology, and thrive in the classroom as a result. No one asked Ben to develop this software; it is just what he does and who he is.

HBS's mission is to educate leaders who make a difference in the world. Ben is a scholar who is a role model of developing the skills necessary to make a (positive) difference in a world. I doubt that I will ever write a paper with Ben, and our teaching interests are vastly different. Yet, Ben is one of my most valued colleagues. I am enthusiastic about this promotion.

I hope that this review is helpful. And, please let me know if you need any additional details.

Sincerely,

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