Nine Myths About Credit Scores

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People think they know what causes a credit score to rise or fall. They're often wrong.

By Demetria Gallegos, *The Wall Street Journal,* Oct. 20, 2019 10:10 pm ET

Everybody wants to have the highest credit score possible. But most people have little idea how to go about getting it. In fact, the opposite is often true: The things that many people believe will help or hurt their score don't actually help or hurt them at all.

Telling fact from myth, though, is crucial, as consumers strive to do what they can to improve their credit score. A higher score can mean better terms on credit cards, lower rates on mortgages and less expensive premiums on auto and homeowners insurance. It can make it more likely to win approval for an apartment, and get deposits waived when setting up services like electricity and cable in a new home. It can even mean a better chance at nabbing a job offer. In other words, a credit score has come to signal much more than the likelihood of defaulting on debt. It is a key to a better standard of living entirely.

With that in mind, here's a look at some misconceptions that hamstring many people—and best practices that will help make your score one that lenders will fight over.

MYTH: Checking my credit score hurts my credit score

Many consumers are confused about the difference between a hard inquiry, in which a financial firm is considering making a loan to you, and a soft inquiry in which, say, an employer is conducting a background check or a utility company is setting up a new account for you. If you're trying to refinance your mortgage or sign up for a store credit card—that is, if credit might be extended—those hard inquiries could each drop your score by a few points. True, there are gray areas that could contribute to the confusion. For example, some home-rental applications are hard inquiries, others are not. You can usually open a bank account with no impact, but signing up for overdraft protection might mean a hard query.

Still, there is no confusion when it comes to seeking information about your own score. That is always a soft inquiry, and won't cost you points. In fact, doing a self-check on your score can empower you to take charge of your credit reputation. Both of the leading scoring models, FICO and VantageScore, are available free. Most mortgage lenders use FICO scores, which everyone can get through Discover's Credit Scorecard. Credit Karma and Mint can provide your VantageScore 3.0., which is relied on especially by the credit-card and auto sectors.

Merely knowing your score can improve it, according to a paper published in July by the National Bureau of Economic Research. Over 400,000 student-loan borrowers were sent a quarterly email reminder about the availability of their FICO scores. On average, their scores increased about eight points over a year compared with borrowers who weren't getting the alerts. They were also 4% less likely to miss a monthly payment.

MYTH: If I pay my bills on time, that's all I need to worry about

For many consumers, the assumption is that on-time bill payment is all that matters when it comes to a good credit score. But that assumption forgets about the importance of credit utilization, which is the percentage of debt you owe compared with the total available credit that's been granted to you. Utilization is one of the most important components of your score. If your credit cards are maxed out, your score won't look good even if you're paying promptly. A rule of thumb is to use less than 30% of your available credit each month and ideally less than 10%.

Another key strategy to consider is calling your card issuer to ask for a higher credit limit. If successful (and 85% of the time it is, according to CreditCards.com, a credit-card comparison site), the request would instantly lower your utilization. "This is one of the fastest, easiest, no-cost ways that anyone can help their score," says industry analyst Ted Rossman of CreditCards.com.

MYTH: Carrying a balance helps boost my credit score

One persistent misconception is that to build a strong credit score people should demonstrate activity by keeping a charge on their credit cards at all times; that is, they should carry debt over from month to month. In fact, 22% of consumers who said they had carried a balance did so mistakenly believing that it would help their credit score, according to a 2018 survey by CreditCards.com. But they are wrong: Keeping a balance on your cards doesn't help and could set back your financial goals, which are better served by consistently paying off credit-card debt in full. "It surprises us that people really do think that carrying a balance is good, but it hurts their credit and you just rack up interest charges," says Dana Marineau, vice president at Credit Karma.

MYTH: Closing an old credit card with a high interest rate will help my score

Sometimes the first credit cards we get—when our credit profiles aren't well established—have higher interest rates than the more competitive cards we can qualify for as our credit usage matures. And people, especially those with low scores, often assume that shedding some credit cards will help boost a credit score. So they close the cards with the higher interest rate and keep the ones with the lower rates.

But the truth is that closing an older credit card won't help your score—and it might actually hurt you. FICO and VantageScore differ on how they factor for a closed credit-card account. FICO ignores the closed account status and continues averaging its age with your active accounts. Depending on the type of account and your credit profile, VantageScore may drop the closed account, shortening your overall age of credit. With both models, if you had a positive payment history on the closed account, that will continue to count in your favor but you've lowered your total amount of available credit, which could raise your utilization and hurt your score.

Regardless of scoring model, a better move, according to Ms. Marineau of Credit Karma, is to pay off any higher-interest credit cards and then keep them open—either with an occasional charge you promptly repay in full, or by putting a small monthly subscription, such as Netflix, onto it, and auto-paying it so that you don't have to think about it. That way, it helps with longevity but can no longer hurt you. Mr. Rossman points out that you should be sure such a semiretired credit card is not costing you each year. "If there is an annual fee, do a product change and ask the issuer to switch you to a different card in their portfolio that does not have a fee." He says you can usually keep the same account number and the positive payment history, and the unused credit limit will continue to make a favorable impact on your utilization rate.

MYTH: Opening a new retail credit card is good for your score

Retailers constantly tempt us to open a new store card by offering a purchase discount or a promotional 0% interest period. And some consumers believe that doing so can help their credit if they pay off the balance within the promotional period. But every time we open a new credit card—or take out a loan or qualify for a mortgage, for that matter—the overall average age of our credit takes a hit, and the hard inquiry subtracts more points from our credit score. "Do the math," says Ethan Dornhelm, vice president of FICO Scores and Predictive Analysis for Fair Issac Corp., the creator of the FICO scoring model. "If it's 10% off of a new washer/dryer, that may be more material, but if it's a couple of free shirts, there should be that calculation or understanding that you may be trading off a few dollars on that retail item for a few points on your FICO score."

An exception might be for a young person just starting out. If they've made it through school without student loans and have been reliant on debit cards, they've essentially been invisible to the credit industry. So getting that first credit card is important to building a thicker credit file, and retail cards are often among the easiest to qualify for. For those people, the myth may be accurate after all.

MYTH: It hurts my credit score to comparison shop for a mortgage, auto or student loan

People looking for a lender sometimes opt for the first deal or interest rate they are offered, fearing that the credit queries from too many lenders will lower their scores. But, the reality is that the scoring models assume you're going through a shopping process. If they see different lenders pulling your credit score around the same time, they bundle multiple requests as a single query. But you have to do that shopping fairly quickly. I learned that lesson when I recently bought a home. I had checked with two different lenders over the summer, which meant two hard inquiries that cost me points. When I spotted the credit-score damage from both prequalification applications I stopped shopping around because I wanted to keep my score high enough to get the best interest rate. VantageScore's shopping period is 14 days. FICO has various scoring models that lenders might look at, with shopping periods ranging from 14 to 45 days during which multiple inquiries count as one. Jeff Richardson, vice president at VantageScore Solutions, recommends waiting until after closing to take on new obligations like furniture and appliances, to prevent those inquiries from hurting your score at the last minute and affecting your mortgage rate.

MYTH: The older my unpaid debt, the more it hurts me

It's true that late payments, collections, foreclosures and chapter 13 bankruptcies hurt your credit score for seven years. A chapter 7 bankruptcy will hurt it for 10 years. But, with the exception of the bankruptcies, the impact of the other problems diminishes as the information ages. After about two years, says Mr. Rossman, the lender has probably charged off the debt and given up. It's the newer delinquencies that will be more aggressively collected, he says. So if you're in arrears, your priority should be on any new or recent problems. As an unpaid bill moves from 30 to 60 to 90 days late, and then finally to collections, that's when a bad problem is on the verge of becoming much worse, and intervention can be much more beneficial.

MYTH: Selecting 'credit' while using your debit card for a purchase is good for your credit score

When you choose to make a credit-type purchase with your debit card, your credit score doesn't benefit—or suffer—from any of those transactions. Still, a survey of 1,051 adults by Credit Card Insider found that 42% of respondents thought using their debit card or selecting the credit option on a debit-card purchase would help their score. "If you put a credit card next to a debit card the optics are very similar," says Bruce McClary, vice president of communications for the National Foundation for Credit Counseling. "You have the name of the bank, you have the Visa or Mastercard logo on each, so it's easy to understand that someone might be confused." Your bank typically won't report any debit-card activity to the credit-reporting companies. The main difference is that choosing the credit option on your debit-card purchase

means the funds could take up to three days to post, whereas the debit option means immediate withdrawal.

Mr. McClary says that for someone worried about getting in over their heads with credit cards, the better choice is to choose a "secured" card in which a user makes an advance deposit against which card purchases are subtracted. Paying that bill essentially restores the full deposit. He recommends double-checking that the card issuer will report that activity to the credit-reporting companies, which then does count as part of your credit-score building efforts.

MYTH: Credit reports are accurate

Most consumers are unaware of what's being said about them between their lenders and the credit-reporting companies. And too many people wrongly assume that what ends up on their credit report – and the resulting credit score—must be correct. The Federal Trade Commission says 21% of consumers studied in 2012 found errors that resulted in modifications by the credit-reporting firms. In 5% of the total number of consumers studied, the error was so serious as to affect the terms of any credit they might be granted. Errors come from many sources. Sometimes, it's a mixed file in which activity from someone with your same name has been conflated with yours. Your ex-spouse's debts could still be showing up in your file. It could be a clerical error because your handwriting was misread. Sometimes, a creditor mistakenly reports a late payment. In some more serious cases, it's identity theft or fraud, which might show up on your report as a credit card or other account you never applied for. The best way to deal with mistakes is to catch them early by regularly looking at your credit report. You are entitled to a free copy of your credit report annually from each of the credit-reporting companies (TransUnion, Experian and Equifax). You can request them at AnnualCreditReport.com or by calling 1-877-322-8228. Experts suggest you stagger the requests every four months between the three companies in order to keep an eye on your credit record all year long.

Edmund Garcia of Rosharon, Texas, says he didn't find out someone had stolen his identity until he tried to buy a house. The 37-year-old disabled veteran had been working on his credit for two years after some youthful missteps before filing the mortgage application which—when rejected—revealed the fraud. "I was so embarrassed and hurt. I had no idea that someone had taken out credit accounts on me," he says. Mr. Garcia says he has had some financial setbacks, particularly with medical bills, but has purposefully brought his score back from 480 to the mid-650s. He joined several financially oriented Facebook groups and signed up with credit-repair services. One strategy he has employed with success is "pay for deletion," in which he offered his creditors settlements in exchange for them resolving or removing

derogatory remarks or judgments on his file. People need to learn all they can about their credit scores, Mr. Garcia says. “Once you fall behind, it’s like trying to climb out of a 60-foot pit.”

There are a few existing and coming programs that aim to help consumers demonstrate responsible financial behavior in areas not previously visible to the credit-reporting companies.

Rental reporting

Paying your rent on time can now help your credit score. Such reporting is handled either by big landlords and property-management companies or by individuals who go through a company that verifies and reports the payments. RentTrack works with housing companies that control many units and reports rent payments to all three credit-reporting companies. Either the property company or the renters pay a fee, about $2.95 per month in the latter case. If renters want to submit their own payment history, they can do so through RentTrack’s CreditPop division. Renters sign up free, but pay $6.95 a month for their payments to be reported to Equifax and TransUnion. Users allow CreditPop access to bank-account activity so that their rent payments can be verified. Rental Kharma, which reports payments to TransUnion, works similarly to CreditPop. Renters pay a $25 enrollment fee and then $6.95 a month. Maitri Johnson, a vice president at TransUnion, which created a program called ResidentCredit, says that they have “found that subprime renters—on the lower scale of the credit scores—when they make timely payments, they can improve their score by 18 points over six months.”

Phone and utility bills

Experian Boost, a free program launched last December by credit-reporting company Experian, factors household payments for services like telephone, cable and utilities into a person’s FICO score. Consumers connect Experian Boost to the bank account they use for paying these bills. The program then pulls the relevant payment history and immediately recalculates their FICO score. Experian says more than two million consumers have enrolled in the free service, with an average score boost of 10 points. The company says bank-account numbers or online access information aren’t shared. “The argument for getting rental and utility payment into the files is that you get the positive impact of making those payments on a regular basis,” says Jeff Richardson, vice president at VantageScore Solutions, which created the VantageScore model. “Because if those accounts go to collection you would get the negative, but you wouldn’t have gotten any credit.” One caveat: Since the program is offered through Experian, only Experian’s credit report will reflect a boost in the FICO score based on those payments.

Bank accounts

In a program expected to launch to consumers next year, FICO will begin taking into account consumers’ banking habits. Under the free program, called UltraFICO, consumers sign up to allow the program to link to their checking, savings or money-market accounts. Consumers are then rated on factors including the account balances they maintain, how long the accounts have been open and avoiding overdrafts. FICO says the service won’t have access to a customer’s private bank information. Ted Rossman, industry analyst at CreditCards.com, says all these programs gather “consumer-permissioned” data that might give lenders more insight into behavior and potential risk. “For example, you may have a 620 credit score but a lot of cash in the bank,” he says. “You can imagine that person might be more creditworthy than a person with the same score with not much in the bank.”

Corrections & Amplifications

VantageScore continues to factor positive payment history from closed accounts into your credit score. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that such positive payment history is erased. (Oct. 22, 2019)

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FICO Changes Could Lower Your Credit Score

https://www.wsj.com/articles/fico-changes-could-lower-your-credit-score-11579780800?mod=cxrecs_join

Credit-scoring company Fair Isaac is making changes that will create a bigger gap between consumers deemed to be good and bad credit risks

By AnnaMaria Andriotis, *The Wall Street Journal,* Jan. 23, 2020

Changes in how the most widely used credit score in the U.S. is calculated will likely make it harder for many Americans to get loans. Fair Isaac Corp., creator of FICO scores, will soon start scoring consumers with rising debt levels and those who fall behind on loan payments more harshly. It will also flag certain consumers who sign up for personal loans, a category of unsecured debt that has surged in recent years.

The changes will create a bigger gap between consumers deemed to be good and bad credit risks, the company says. Consumers with already-high FICO scores of about 680 or higher who continue to manage loans well will likely get a higher score than under previous FICO versions. Those with already-low scores below 600 who continue to miss payments or accumulate other black marks will experience bigger score declines than under previous models.

Millions of consumers could see their scores rise or fall as a result of the changes, the company said. The changes are an about-face from recent years, when FICO and credit-reporting companies made changes that helped increase scores for some consumers, such as removing some negative information, including civil judgments, from credit reports. Credit scoring and reporting companies also recently started factoring in such information as bank account balances and utilities payments to help give consumers with limited credit histories a better shot at getting loans. Those recent moves can help revenue-hungry lenders identify more creditworthy consumers and make it easier for them to be approved for loans. Average FICO scores have been rising steadily following some of these changes and an improving economy. The U.S. consumer borrowing industry revolves around companies such as FICO, which help lenders decide whom to lend to. Credit-reporting firms including Experian PLC, Equifax Inc. and Trans Union collect data on consumers and compile it in consumers' credit reports, which then determine their FICO scores.

The new FICO changes reflect a shift in U.S. lenders' confidence in the economy, which has been expanding for more than 10 years. Consumer loan losses remain low compared with during the last recession, but consumer debts are at record highs, with many Americans forced to rely on debt to help fund their everyday lives. Lenders in recent years had asked the credit-reporting and scoring companies to help them find more borrowers. But lenders are also trying to balance the need to expand loan volume with a rising concern about the longevity of the economic recovery and whether credit scores are making

some consumers appear more creditworthy than they are. "There are some lenders that see there are problems on the horizon in terms of consumer performance or uncertainty [about] how long this [recovery] is going to go," said David Shellenberger, vice president of scores and predictive analytics at FICO. "We definitely are finding pockets of greater risk." On an earnings call last year, Capital One Financial Corp. Chief Executive Richard Fairbank warned that consumers across the industry might not be as creditworthy as their scores suggest. Missed payments and most other negative information that would hurt a score typically roll off a report after seven years, which means lenders might not have insight into how a consumer fared during the crisis, he said.

The changes will affect new versions of the FICO scores. FICO updates its scoring model every few years to reflect changes in consumer borrowing behavior and performance. When it last announced such changes, in 2014, they were viewed as likely to help boost consumers' credit scores. Whether to adopt the new FICO scores will be up to lenders, which can generally decide which version of FICO to use or whether to use a competitor such as VantageScore. (There are some exceptions: For example, most lenders use a certain version of the FICO score to sell mortgages to Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.) One of the new versions, called FICO 10 T, will place greater weight on recently missed payments. Consumers who fall behind or stop paying their debts are likely to see their credit scores fall more with this model. Those whose last delinquency is at least a year old could see an improvement in their scores.

The changes are meant to partly offset the effects of settlements between credit-reporting firms and states that date to 2015. Those settlements, aimed at removing erroneous information from credit reports, resulted in Equifax, Experian and TransUnion removing most tax liens and judgments from reports. Unlike previous FICO scores, 10 T will assess how consumers' debt levels have changed during the past two or so years. FICO scores so far have reflected consumers' balances during roughly the most recent month tracked. This change will place more weight on rising debt levels. Consumers who previously paid their credit-card bills in full but shift to carrying growing balances for several months will likely end up with a lower score. On the other hand, consumers who tend to increase card debt during a specific month each year and then pay it off quickly will likely experience a smaller drop in their score than they currently do. The changes will likely hurt scores even more for consumers who have a high "utilization" ratio—for example, when credit-card debt is nearly equal to a consumer's set spending limit—for a sustained period of time. FICO for the first time will place more weight on personal loans in a way that penalizes some borrowers. For example, consumers who transfer credit-card debt to a personal loan but continue to rack up credit-card balances will likely experience a bigger drop in their credit scores.

How Artificial Intelligence Could Replace Credit Scores and Reshape How We Get Loans

https://www.marketwatch.com/story/ai-based-credit-scores-will-soon-give-one-billion-people-access-to-banking-services-2018-10-09

By Emily Bary, *Market Watch*, October 29, 2018

You may not think the number of words in an email subject line says anything about you, but at least one company is betting that the metric can help determine your likelihood of paying back a loan.

LenddoEFL, based in Singapore, is one of a handful of startups using alternative data points for credit scoring. Those companies review behavioral traits and smartphone habits to build models of creditworthiness for consumers in emerging markets, where standard credit reporting barely exists.

In addition to analyzing financial-transaction data, Lenddo's algorithm takes into consideration things such as whether you avoid one-word subject lines (meaning you care about details) and regularly use financial apps on your smartphone (meaning you take your finances seriously). Lenddo also looks at the ratio of smartphone photos in your library that were taken with a front-facing camera, since selfies indicate youth, helping the company divide people into customer segments.

The data points are unconventional, but Darshan Shah, Lenddo's managing director for South Asia, says the company's overall algorithm is a reliable predictor of creditworthiness for the so-called underbanked. For those who lack formal credit histories, Lenddo and others say artificial intelligence can help sort through a variety of data points that, in sum, indicate financial responsibility.

"The potential this technology has is massive," said Arjuna Costa, a partner at the Omidyar Network, which was founded by billionaire entrepreneur Pierre Omidyar. The Omidyar Network has invested in alternative-lending companies including LenddoEFL and Boston-based Cignifi. Costa estimates that new forms of loan scoring could help provide credit access to 1 billion people worldwide, especially in emerging economies in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

If such new methods work well in emerging economies, they could be employed in the U.S., where more than 30 million individuals are underbanked, said PayPal Holdings Inc. CEO Dan Schulman. The underbanked lack access to common financial products such as checking accounts, savings accounts, credit cards and loans. "For most people, it's not that their expenses are greater than revenues, it's that their cash flows are uneven," Schulman said. "And that's what gets them into trouble."

In the U.S., creditors rely on FICO scoring, which takes into account borrowing history when gauging whether you're likely to pay back a loan. The system works well enough for those who've already gotten loans and paid them back on time, but it excludes those who aren't in the digital financial system and can't get loans in the first place.

From cash to credit

Credit access is worse in emerging markets, where most people conduct cash-based transactions, lack bank records and don't have assets to serve as collateral. Until recently, financial-services providers have deemed it too risky and costly to provide loans to the underbanked, but the wealth of data available from smartphones is changing that. Alternative data points are providing a new means for credit access beyond traditional micro-loan programs.

For developing countries, easier access to credit could jump-start economic progress. Shivani Siroya, chief executive officer of Santa Monica, Calif.-based Tala, told the story of a woman working in marketing in the Philippines who took out a loan through the Tala platform to buy a glazing machine for her doughnut business, a venture she pursued on the side. Eventually, she was able to quit her marketing job and hire an additional employee for her doughnut store.

Renée Hunter, a researcher at the Centre for Financial Regulation and Inclusion, a South African think tank, said that while consumers might use initial loans of small amounts to deal with day-to-day consumption, they develop a "shift in mindset" when they take out larger loans and find ways to purchase items that could ultimately yield profits.

"Lending is core to business development," said Avi Goldfarb, a marketing professor and artificial-intelligence (AI) expert at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. Better prediction models may increase the willingness to lend, he added, which "could be exciting for these countries' economies."

Unmet financing needs

About 65 million micro-, small- and medium-sized businesses in the developing world have unmet financing needs that amount to $5.2 trillion in total, according to a joint report from the International Finance Corp. and the SME Finance Forum. That number represents the amount of financing that would be possible if small businesses in developing countries had the same credit access that companies in developed countries have.

Traditional emerging-market lenders have considered moving down-market for decades, but it was often time-consuming and costly to identify potential borrowers, assess risk and collect money. New credit systems that make use of AI, coupled with rising smartphone penetration, cut out some of those impediments: Mobile phones make it easier for financial-services providers to find customers and collect their money, while algorithms reduce the costs of risk assessment, said Omidyar Network's Costa.

The data points that get fed into alternative credit models vary, but many involve information from mobile devices. The GSM Association, a telecommunications trade group, predicted last year that smartphone penetration in developing markets could increase to 62% in 2020 from 47% in 2016. That compares with a 65% level of smartphone penetration, considered to be "mature," in developed markets. So the number of people with access to alternative credit is rising by the day.

Smartphones, satellites

Smartphone data can be useful for small-store owners who've traditionally needed to pay upfront for inventory. Sokowatch, a Kenya-based company that also operates in Tanzania, uses mobile records of shopkeepers' orders and payment patterns to extend purchase credit. The company counts Unilever and Procter & Gamble Co. among its partners.

"Shopkeepers have issues of cash-flow management, so to buy products on credit is really a lifesaver," said Maelis Carraro, a senior associate at Somerville, Mass.-based BFA, a consulting firm focused on financial inclusion. Another startup, Newark, Calif.-based Harvesting, employs satellite technology and artificial intelligence to scan small farms for size, crop type, harvest progress and weather effects. Using its own algorithms, the company helps eligible farmers get loans.

Matteo Marinelli, CEO of Myanmar-based microfinance institution Maha Agriculture, is beginning to employ Harvesting data alongside his company's more traditional credit-scoring model. He is aiming to double the number of active Maha borrowers from less than 15,000 today to 32,000 by March, in part because the Harvesting tools help improve predictive capabilities and enable weather monitoring.

"In the abstract, having access to credit is better than not having access to credit and certainly better than having access to really predatory credit at extremely high interest rates," said Stephen Rea, a fellow at the Institute for Money, Technology, and Financial Inclusion at the University of California, Irvine. Still, he cautions that while increased credit access has the potential to meaningfully improve the standard of living in emerging markets, companies and consumers must tread carefully.

Before AI-based credit models, underbanked consumers could seek out credit opportunities within their own communities, through micro-loan programs that allowed them to borrow money locally. Neighbors would pool money and borrowers would each get chances to make use of the communal pot. Those offerings helped expand credit access, but they were known to carry high interest rates, prompting criticism that they only served to trap people deeper in a cycle of poverty.

Interest rates on newer loan options vary widely, but Costa, of the Omidyar Network, notes that annual percentage rates (APRs), which are sometimes in the triple digits, can be misleading since many loans cover relatively short durations, sometimes just a few days.

Artificial intelligence

AI-driven credit models also rely on data-scraping technology, which introduces privacy concerns. Users give credit-scoring apps permission to access things like text and call logs, GPS data, address books and digital transactions, but some companies are more explicit about their privacy policies than others. Consumers also have to trust that lending companies are properly encrypting and safeguarding their data.

Another concern is that artificial intelligence will introduce new kinds of biases into the lending process. The University of Toronto's Goldfarb warned that prediction models may make use of data that's discriminatory, such as zip-code information that's highly correlated with ethnicity. "If certain ethnic groups get more loans than others because a machine predicts it, that's something that should be audited and corrected," he said.

Alternative credit-scoring models are beginning to take off in emerging markets, but they've been so far muted in the U.S. and other developed countries, partly due to already higher rates of financial inclusion. Still, the algorithms hold promise, especially for those who are still relying on payday lenders that charge "insane" interest rates, said Camilo Tellez, head of research and innovation at the Better Than Cash Alliance in New York.

Though they're more focused on business loans than consumer loans, companies such as Square Inc. and PayPal already make use of artificial intelligence to provide merchants credit by reviewing transaction data and other non-traditional methods. PayPal's Schulman has suggested that consumer applications could be next, especially in the U.S. "If you can really understand an individual or small business through advanced ways of looking at data and information, then you can responsibly lend to individuals who might otherwise be forced out of the financial system," he said.

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