



Recruiting fairly for the best candidate: reducing bias and supporting diversity in key recruitment decisions.

Guide for Business Leaders

Diversity
Partners

Creating Inclusive Cultures

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Dr Katie Spearritt, CEO,
Diversity Partners

How does unconscious bias impact recruitment?

While we think we recruit the ‘best’ person solely on merit, the recruitment process can be a flawed means of selecting talent. That’s because our automatic assumptions and stereotypes about people can impact decision-making – often without us even being aware.

There’s now extensive research from the fields of business psychology and neuroscience to show we are all biased, even though we like to think that we always apply logic and reason in our decision-making. The reality is we all have these biases so ingrained we hardly notice them.

Having bias isn’t bad – it’s natural. We naturally gravitate to people who are like us – it’s called affinity bias – particularly in social situations.

We like to have our views confirmed rather than challenged (confirmation bias) and groups in the workplace have a tendency to align with the views of leaders, especially when the boss speaks up first (sunflower management).

But this becomes a problem in the workplace when subtle biases and stereotypes associated with different demographic groups lead us to overlook or unintentionally exclude some people and groups.

That’s why it’s important to understand how cognitive biases and social/demographic biases (relating to age, gender, cultural background) can affect our judgement and impact the treatment and assessment of candidates, and take steps to reduce their impact.

Unconscious biases can narrow the talent pool, leading to poor decision-making and inhibiting diversity progress in organisations. The tips in this guide are designed to reduce the potential for unconscious bias throughout the recruitment process, and strengthen opportunities to recruit and promote diverse candidate pools. That way, we’re more likely to make fair and objective recruitment decisions.



'Cognitive biases muddy our decision making. We rely too heavily on intuitive, automatic judgements, and even when we try to use reason, our logic is often lazy or flawed.'

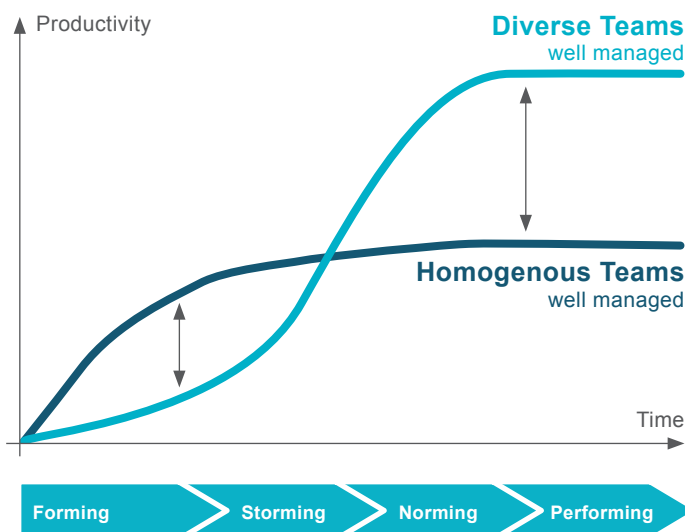
Jack B. Soll, Katherine L. Milkman, and John W. Payne, 'Outsmart Your Own Biases', **Harvard Business Review**, May 2015

'Finding the right people is also not a matter of "culture fit." What most people really mean when they say someone is a good fit culturally is that he or she is someone they'd like to have a beer with. But people with all sorts of personalities can be great at the job you need done. This misguided hiring strategy can also contribute to a company's lack of diversity, since very often the people we enjoy hanging out with have backgrounds much like our own.'

Patty McCord 'How to hire', **Harvard Business Review**, Jan-Feb 2018.

Why is hiring with diversity and inclusion in mind important?

Diverse workforces and inclusive workplaces bring significant benefits. Employees feel more engaged, new ideas are welcomed, breakthrough insights are generated, and decisions more robust. Diverse teams have stronger engagement with diverse customers, opening up new market opportunities. Business performance is higher over time with well-managed diverse teams.



Source: Korn Ferry, Inclusive Leadership, 2016

'Our best work comes from the diversity of ideas and people. We believe in a modern definition of diversity – the big D – which supports creative friction and its contribution to making better products.'

Tim Cook, CEO Apple

Evidence of unconscious bias

Australian National University researchers conducted a study in which fictitious individuals, identical in all respects apart from their ethnicity, applied for jobs. The researchers randomly submitted more than 4000 fictional applications for entry-level jobs, and found that ethnic minority candidates would need to apply for more jobs to receive the same number of invitations to interviews.

To get as many interviews as an Anglo applicant with an Anglo-sounding name, an Indigenous person must submit 35 per cent more applications, a Chinese person must submit 68 per cent more applications, an Italian person must submit 12 per cent more applications, and a Middle Eastern person 64 per cent more applications.

Alison Booth, 'Job hunt success is all in a name', Crawford School of Public Policy, 2013

The value of diversity

1. Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity are 21 percent more likely to have financial returns above their national industry medians. Ethnically diverse companies are 33% more likely to outperform. (McKinsey, 2017).
2. When employees think their organisation is highly committed to, and supportive of diversity, and they feel highly included, then they are 80% more likely to agree that they work in a high performing organisation (Deloitte, **Waiter is that inclusion in my soup – a new recipe to improve business performance**, 2013).



Elements of workforce diversity

‘Surface-level diversity’ (such as gender, culture, functional roles and educational disciplines) as well as ‘deep-level diversity’ – different mental frameworks or thinking approaches to solve problems – are important for teams to perform at their peak (Bourke, **Which Two Heads are Better than One?** 2016).

Diversity, in its broadest sense, refers to all the differences and experiences we bring to work. It’s a collection of unique attributes that include, but are not limited to, gender, language, cultural background/identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, age, caring responsibilities, religion, education, experience, perspective and thinking approaches.



Some of our differences are visible; most are invisible.
(Source: Brook-Graham)

To capitalize on hiring diverse talent, promote inclusion in leadership behaviours, processes and policies.

It’s not enough to bring together people from diverse backgrounds and hope for the best. What’s equally important is a workplace culture and processes that promote inclusion.

Inclusion refers to a work environment where diverse viewpoints, perspectives, and backgrounds are valued and encouraged. Employees feel a strong sense of belonging in inclusive workplaces.

Verna Myers, an American diversity advocate, differentiates the terms diversity and inclusion with the analogy that: “Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance.”

Hiring managers that display inclusive leadership characteristics are more likely to make fair and objective decisions by avoiding unconscious bias and recognizing the value of different perspectives. Hiring people with a strong inclusion competency also helps to embed diversity and inclusion in the wider organization.

‘When a candidate with inclusive values and skills is hired, his or her workplace behaviours naturally promote diversity.’

Corporate Leadership Council,
Beneath the surface of diversity recruiting, 2011

‘At the heart of a team’s success stands the inclusive leader. One who is aware of unconscious biases and open to understanding diverse perspectives to help navigate the challenges facing the team.’

Deloitte, **Inclusive Leadership: will a hug do?** 2012



Types of Bias that can affect Recruitment & Promotion

GENERAL

Halo Effect:

Occurs when one positive attribute of a candidate is generalised to other attributes, distorting the assessment of the candidate's competence (e.g. research has shown that tall people are unconsciously favoured for leadership positions).

Negative evidence bias/pitchfork effect:

This occurs when one unfavourable impression produces an overall negative effect and rejection of the candidate.

Affinity bias:

Occurs when we gravitate to people who we perceive to be like us and create a sense of familiarity.

Confirmation bias:

Occurs when we are drawn to evidence that confirms our own beliefs and preferences, making it easy to ignore evidence that contradicts it.

Primacy/Availability bias:

Occurs when we place more weight on information presented early in the interview. Research has shown that most interviewers make their decisions within the first few minutes of an interview.

Blind-spot bias:

We notice the impact of biases on the judgement of others, but fail to see the impact of biases in ourselves.

GENDER BIASES

- We commonly evaluate people unconsciously across two dimensions – competence/ assertiveness and warmth.
- Men are typically associated with competence (personal power, status, influence) and women with warmth (relationships, care-giving). This explains why assertive women in leadership roles are generally viewed more harshly than assertive men and non-assertive women. It also means that people who behave in a stereotype-inconsistent way are less likely to be hired.
- Our models of leadership map more closely to stereotypical male traits rather than female ones.
- The gender of the people currently doing the role will influence who is seen as most suitable for it.
- Someone wishing to work flexibly will be viewed less favourably.
- Women's success in management positions is more likely to be attributed to external factors (such as a good team) while men's success is more likely to be attributed to skill or personality.
- Women as well as men have a bias towards men in leadership positions.

Source: Binna & Jo Kandola, **The Invention of Difference: The story of gender bias at work**, Pearn Kandola, 2013



1. Tips to reduce unconscious bias when writing Position Descriptions

Guideline	Why is this important?
Use the standard position description template	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creates an objective and consistent framework and reduces the risk of hiring and promotion decisions based on 'gut feeling' and unconscious bias.
Avoid gendered language and terminology in role requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It's important that descriptions have a mix of words associated with male and female characteristics to attract a diverse talent pool. The following words have an implicit masculine connotation: dominant, competition, superior, determined, decisive, lead, independently, challenging, competitive. The following words have a feminine association: committed, loyal, connected, responsible, cooperative, supportive, trust, dependable, interpersonal, and considerate.
<p>Describe the role broadly and carefully consider specific requirements</p> <p>Seek diverse inputs on the role requirements from a range of stakeholders</p>	<p>The pool of talented candidates is narrowed when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Roles are defined unnecessarily tightly (e.g. in terms of technical credentials) Excessive weighting is placed on experience and length of service Insufficient focus is placed on demonstrated capabilities and future potential There is low recognition of skills that are easily transferable into a new context Flexible work options are not offered (implicitly or explicitly)
Focus on how the job requirements align with future strategic business and people needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This avoids focusing on current transactional operating needs and reduces the mental connection between a role and the attributes of the current or most recent incumbent. Research shows that the gender of the people currently doing the role will influence who is seen as most suitable.
Include an explicit statement on your commitment to diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publicly demonstrates our commitment to fair and objective hiring processes and to attracting a diverse pool of candidates.
Consider if the role can be offered flexibly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The assumption of 'normal' work, particularly at management levels, is that it will be done between certain hours at a particular location. But this can led to an over-emphasis on presence rather than performance when assessing employees. Offering some form of flexible work arrangement is more likely to lead to a broader talent pool, and greater retention of employees in the long-term.



2. Tips to reduce unconscious bias in Job Advertising

Guideline	Why is this important?
Ensure any images reflect diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Candidates from diverse backgrounds are more likely to apply for positions where they can see diversity (in images and statements). For example, women often opt out of applying for jobs when the words and imagery focus on stereotypically male attributes – ‘you can’t be what you can’t see’.
Advertise across different channels rather than rely on traditional/established sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A cohort of potential talent may be overlooked when traditional sources are used.
If using an external recruitment supplier, brief them on your commitment to attracting a diverse pool of candidates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agencies that are familiar with your commitment to attracting a diverse pool of candidates are more likely to seek candidates beyond the traditional sources. Ask the recruiters to provide you with both males and females for shortlisting for management roles. Explain that you would like them to focus on seeking a range of diverse skills and experience.

3. Tips to reduce unconscious bias when Shortlisting

When shortlisting candidates, it’s important to be aware of any assumptions and stereotypes you may have regarding the ‘fit’ between the candidate and the position.

Guideline	Why is this important?
Consider use of ‘blind’ CVs (names, demographic data redacted)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This reduces the risks of unconscious bias when filtering CVs. Recruiters/hiring managers give less credence to resumes with non-Anglo sounding names and from women (even when exactly the same CV is used).
Include an explicit statement that ‘selection criteria should aim to reflect a diversity of styles, rather than the prevailing leadership style and biases’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This encourages hiring managers to think innovatively about candidates, and reduces the potential for affinity bias and groupthink. Evaluate candidates for their inclusion skills, not just surface-level diversity characteristics.



4. Tips to reduce unconscious bias when Interviewing

The interviewing process can be a flawed means of selecting talent because of the potential for our automatic assumptions and stereotypes to impact decision-making.

It's important to understand the range of cognitive biases and social/demographics biases (e.g. age, gender, cultural background) that can affect judgement and impact the treatment and assessment of the candidate.

These guidelines help managers to select the most qualified talent by focusing on skills rather than other factors.

Guideline	Why is this important?
<p>Call candidates pre-interview to determine any special requirements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asking candidates if they have any special requirements for the interview (these may include access requirements to the interview premises, resource or support requirements) demonstrates your commitment to an inclusive workforce Note that candidates are not required to disclose if they have a disability.
<p>Use a consistent approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aim to ask all candidates the same questions and keep a record of both questions and answers. Aim to spend the same amount of time with each candidate. When using different assessment methods (e.g. task-based and/or behavioural interviewing), make sure all candidates are exposed to the same mixture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structured interviews are much more accurate predictors of performance than open-ended interviews, because it's easier to compare people on specific dimensions. Too much hiring manager discretion increases the potential for subjectivity, inconsistency and bias.
<p>Use competency-based questions that relate to the inherent role requirements and ensure everyone is assessed on the same questions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focusing on skills and broad experience reduces the potential for subjective assessments of the candidate.
<p>Include an inclusion competency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Select candidates with inclusion competency by asking targeted questions about their diversity knowledge, values, experience, and actions (see suggestions on next page).
<p>Give adequate time to the process.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unconscious bias is exacerbated by stress or time pressure.
<p>Where possible, ask a diverse group of leaders to sit on the selection panel, including at least one male and female representative of equal decision making authority</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It's difficult to engage potential talent if the interviewers are mainly from a default 'in-group' (e.g. typically in male-dominated companies, Anglo male, 40+ leaders) A narrow demographic profile of interviewers also presents an implicit non-diverse 'face' to candidates and potential customers.
<p>Be mindful of the range of biases that can impact interviewing, and take steps to challenge them (in yourself and other interviewers).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessments about cultural 'fit' with the team and organisation can be a disguise for bias and lead to hiring of default 'types'.



Sample interview questions you can ask to assess for diversity and inclusion competency

- What have you done to improve your knowledge about diversity? How have you demonstrated what you have learned?
- Tell me about a time you worked on a team with diverse backgrounds and experiences. What were the benefits of team diversity?
- How have you handled a situation when a colleague or a direct report was not accepting of others' background, values, or experiences?
- Have you ever seen any bias against someone from a different background than the norm? What did you do?

Source: Corporate Leadership Council, *Beneath the surface of diversity recruiting*, 2011

In summary:

When you're preparing your job advertisement, then...

- Proof read your role advertisements with a diversity lens to ensure the language is inclusive. It's important that descriptions have a mix of words associated with male and female characteristics to attract a diverse talent pool. Words such as 'dominant' and 'competitive' have a masculine connotation; words such as 'committed', 'interpersonal' have a feminine connotation.

When you're briefing a recruiter or agency, then...

- Share your expectation of receiving the broadest possible candidate pool. Ask recruiters to provide you with gender-balanced and culturally diverse shortlists for management roles. Explain that you would like them to focus on seeking a range of diverse skills and experience.

When you're preparing to shortlist candidates, then...

- Consider receiving the shortlisted CVs as 'blind CVs' with references to gender, age, disability and ethnicity removed. This will ensure you assess each candidate fairly against the requirements of the role and have a diverse mix of talent in your candidate pool.
- Ask candidates if they have any special requirements for the interview (these may include access requirements to the interview premises, resource or support requirements).

When you're setting up a selection panel, then...

- Ensure you ask a diverse group of leaders to sit on the panel, including at least one male and female representative of equal decision-making authority. Train those leaders to recognise unconscious biases and encourage them to provide feedback to each other.

When you're interviewing, then...

- Focus on the candidate's skills, experience and knowledge.
- Use competency-based questions that relate to the inherent role requirements and ensure everyone is assessed on the same questions.
- Give every candidate the same amount of time so they have equal opportunity to demonstrate their strengths.
- Appreciate benefits of diversity of thought in team make up.
- Give adequate time to the process. Stress, time pressures, and cognitive overload can exacerbate our unconscious biases.