Employee Benefit Plan Review

Ask the Experts

BY BRIAN P. SEAMAN

INCLUSIVE HIRING

Q I handle all the hiring for my company. We are always competing for diverse talent, both at the entry-level and for more senior positions. I want to be sure I am doing everything I can to make my company stand out and ensure access to top candidates. Can you provide me with a few tips to advance the ball in regard to attracting diverse talent and creating an interview environment that ensures that this talent knows our company embraces equity and inclusion?

A There are three steps to take to attract the kind of employees you are asking about.

1. *Ensure Diverse Candidates Are Aware of Specific Job Opportunities*

This first step is likely the most obvious – you will never be able to increase the diversity of your organization if diverse talent does not know that your company is hiring. For that reason, you need to take affirmative and targeted action to ensure that top talent is finding your company's opportunities.

It makes sense to differentiate between job openings for entry-level positions and those for more senior positions. Entry-level positions are most likely being filled with college students or recent graduates, so posting your job with diversity organizations at academic institutions is often highly effective. For example, if

you are a law firm seeking summer associates, you would want to identify the diversity bar organizations within law schools – for example, the Black Law Student Association (BLSA), the Asian American Law Students Association (AALSA) and the LGBT Law Student Group (often called OutLaw) – and provide every job opening and job description to those organizations. Identifying each of these groups in every law school and determining how to post jobs there may seem like a daunting and time-consuming task but remember two things:

- This is time well spent to gain access to top candidates; and
- Once you have identified the groups for the first posting, subsequent postings will require almost no effort.

A similar tactic is required to catch the eye of more senior candidates, but instead of posting with academic groups, you will want to post with organizations made up of diverse professionals. If you are an accounting firm looking for diverse candidates for your open senior accountant position, you should be registering your job opportunity with, for example, the National Association of Black Accountants and the Association of Latino Professionals in Finance and Accounting. Studies show that experienced diverse professionals seeking alternative employment often begin their job search by speaking with their diverse colleagues within

these types of professional organizations, so do not miss out on this opportunity.

2. *Ensure That Diverse Talent Knows About Your Company's Commitment to Equity*

Getting your job descriptions and opportunities in front of diverse candidates is a good first step, but most companies committed to equity and inclusion will take the steps outlined above. In order to stand out – and to have diverse candidates excited to interview with you – you must demonstrate that your company is dedicated to equity and inclusion through action.

This may seem like a challenging objective – how do you communicate to candidates with whom you have no prior connection that your company acts to diversify its workforce and create an inclusive work environment? This is easier than you may think, but it takes some planning and some long-term commitment.

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It is important to ensure that the language of your job postings and descriptions is inclusive. For example, you should avoid language that suggests non-native American applicants are not welcome, such as "mastery of the English language required" or "English native speaker." Instead, you can just state that job applicants must be "fluent" or "proficient" in English.

The same goes for the use of gendered pronouns such as "he," even when that pronoun is being used generally to encompass all genders. It is completely acceptable to use "they" in job descriptions, especially when

this is inclusive of non-binary gender expressions.

Finally, consider removing any reference to "years of necessary experience" in favor of the identification of core competencies to ensure that you are not eliminating junior candidates.

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Also, be aware of other opportunities to help potential candidates to understand your company's commitment to diversity and inclusion through action. For example, you could send some of your current diverse employees to provide a crash course on interviewing diverse college students, or you could support the work of a professional organization advancing Asian Americans in tech by sponsoring one of its events or donating to a scholarship fund. One of the easiest ways to demonstrate your company's commitment is right in the job description – you should state that an individual commitment to inclusion is a requirement for the position and that the compensation package for your business provides inclusive benefits such as paid parental leave for all employees and health coverage for fertility and family planning.

3. *Standardize Your Interviews to Reduce Bias*

The two best practices already outlined here are highly effective in attracting top, diverse talent to apply to your company. However, it is necessary for your business to create an interview experience that reduces bias in selection and that communicates, once again, that your stated

commitment to inclusion and equity is more than just words.

Traditional interview schedules often follow the same format. A candidate will meet a series of current employees in one-on-one interviews that are highly unstructured. Each interviewer spends a set amount of time speaking with the candidate and determining – in their own unique way – whether the candidate is a good "fit" for the organization. This method, however, is highly ineffective in identifying candidates who have the necessary skills and ability to succeed in the role. It instead creates a system where results are both biased and random based on whether there is a "connection" of some kind between the candidate and the interviewer.

This predisposition leads to biased results in hiring, especially when many organizations identify non-diverse employees to conduct interviews. These interviewers are less likely to connect with diverse candidates in the same way as they might identify with majority candidates. There are three easy ways organizations overcome these barriers and ensure that all candidates are given equal opportunities to succeed.

• First, you should create a clear list of "must-have" job requirements before beginning the process. This ensures that candidates are being selected for their skills and experience – and not because of some affinity with interviewers. For example, for an entry-level position at a marketing agency in Baltimore, Maryland, an organization may require graduation from a college or university, a personal connection to the Baltimore area, proficiency with certain computer systems and a desire to join that particular agency. By identifying in advance those traits and accomplishments as necessary to succeed in the role, bias is minimized as much as possible because the requirements are objective and preset.

- Second, you should consider asking all candidates a standard set of questions to all candidates. In a traditional hiring process – with one-on-one interviews and no direct guidance on what should be asked during those interviews – two equally qualified candidates can have very different experiences. One candidate may spend 30 minutes of an interview discussing how she and her interviewer share an interest in tennis or went to the same college, while a second candidate may be questioned on perceived gaps in his resume or on his grades. One can guess which candidate will likely get the better review.

  To combat such a situation, organizations must place all candidates on an equal playing field by asking consistent questions that target the specific traits necessary for success. For example, if leadership is necessary for success in the role, ask all candidates about a time when they demonstrated leadership under challenging circumstances. If the job involves coordination between several teams, ask candidates about a situation in which they bridged the gap between individuals or groups that did not see eye to eye. This process allows your company to compare two candidates fairly based on their answers to germane questions and not on how they "connected" with interviewers.

- Third, consider replacing one-on-one interviews with panel interviews. The results of this type of change are profound – interviewers are no longer able to evaluate individual candidates on fit with the company or on whether the interviewer had something in common with the candidate; interviewers are instead required to evaluate a group of applicants together after those applicants had the same opportunity to answer the same questions. This change removes affinity bias from the process in a significant manner and allows panelists to question and challenge each other on their choices.

In addition, consider explaining to applicants at the beginning of each interview that you have made structural changes to the interview process specifically to reduce bias. This tells all applicants – especially diverse ones – that your organization not only talks about inclusion and equity but also builds processes designed to promote those goals. It also opens the door for diverse applicants to ask questions they perceive as challenging, such as those regarding barriers to success. Whether you follow all or some of these recommendations, you will be on the way to meeting your hiring goals. ✿

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