

Is your hiring process hindering your inclusion efforts? Three redesigns to reduce bias

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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.

Often an interviewer will recommend a candidate for hire not because she has the necessary experience and desire but because she went to the same college or grew up in the same area as the interviewer. Or the interviewer will recommend the candidate because she reminds the interviewer of a younger version of herself. That interviewer may want to give that candidate a break in the same way someone gave her a break many years earlier.

Put simply, all of us are predisposed to connect with others who think like us and who may share our experiences. 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.

So how do organizations overcome these barriers and ensure that all candidates are given equal opportunities to succeed? This article explores three easy ways to disrupt bias in your hiring process.

Create a clear list of job requirements before beginning the process

In order to ensure that job candidates are being selected for their skills and experience — and not because of some affinity with interviewers — it is necessary to identify the “must have” requirements of that position before the selection process ever begins.

For example, for an associate position at a law firm in Philadelphia, an organization may require enrollment in law school, academic excellence demonstrated through law school and undergrad GPAs,

a connection to the Philadelphia area, leadership established through involvement in community or scholastic organizations, and desire to join the particular firm.

By identifying those traits and accomplishments as necessary to succeed in the role, organizations can easily complete the first round of eliminations following a resume and cover letter review. Those with the qualifications are moved to the interview round, and those without likely do not. Bias is minimized as much as possible because the requirements are objective and preset.

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This listing of attributes also allows a second reviewer to check whether affinity bias has crept into the process. If a rejected candidate has all of the necessary qualifications, a second reviewer can challenge that rejection and question why that individual was removed from the process. Similarly, if a candidate has advanced without those qualifications, the review can be challenged on how that happened and why necessary traits were deemed unnecessary.

One point of caution: Make sure your list of “must haves” are actually essential for the role — creating an unnecessarily long list of traits for an “ideal” candidate can eliminate qualified candidates and create a barrier for accessing diverse talent.

Ask 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 a 30-minute interview with an interviewer discussing their shared interest in playing tennis or their summers at the Jersey Shore. The other 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 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.

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The results of this type of change are profound — interviewers are no longer able to evaluate individual candidates on “fit” with the organization 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.

One additional tip: At the beginning of each interview, disclose to applicants that your process involves a series of standard questions, each of which goes to one of the traits necessary for success in the role. You should also disclose that this structure is specifically designed to reduce bias in the process and to ensure that all applicants have the same opportunity to succeed. 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.

About the author



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Institute panel interviews to combat individual bias

There are many benefits of panel interviewing — it is often more efficient and takes up less overall time. It allows junior interviewers to learn best practices from more seasoned panel members and to improve their techniques. And it allows candidates to demonstrate how they will perform in group meetings once hired.

In regard to bias, however, panel interviews have two major advantages — first, the presence of multiple evaluators requires that the group stays on task and asks the questions that truly predict future success in the role. A panel structure eliminates the possibility that the interviewer may go off-script and spend 30 minutes discussing a shared experience or a candidate’s hobbies. If one panel member veers away from the questions that matter, another can steer the conversation back to substance.

Second, it also allows this group of decision-makers to meet in real-time to reach a consensus about a candidate when compared to other candidates that came before. Each panel member can discuss their experiences with and perceptions of a candidate, and panel members can question each other as to why they felt the way they did.

They also can call each other on their inherent biases. Suppose one interviewer consistently gives high marks to candidates who went to his college, share his life experiences, or have the same gender, race or sexual orientation. In that case the rest of the panel can scrutinize those choices and disrupt this predisposition.

One final note about panel interviews: Be sure that the members of your panel are as diverse as the workforce you are hoping to build. If all members look the same or have the same views and perspectives, many of your efforts will be negated. More importantly, candidates who cannot find anyone on the panel who looks or thinks like them will perceive your organization as a place where they will not feel included or able to succeed.

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