Bias-Free Hiring Process Guide

Hiring is all about finding the person with the right skills and experience to help your company solve a particular set of challenges. You have a pool of candidates to choose from and need to identify the ideal one in the bunch.

However, there is no perfect answer to the question of "who is the best person for this job?" Each decision maker will have a unique opinion that stems from their own thoughts, feelings, and life experiences. While each of them might intend to select the most suitable candidate, biases can lead them to consider factors that aren't relevant.

Unfortunately, hiring biases negatively impact both the company and the candidates who apply for the role. A person who is well suited for the job – and in turn will make the company successful – can be passed over for someone who pleases the sensibilities of the selection committee. And of course, it's unfair to the qualified candidate who does everything right but still loses out on a career opportunity.

In this guide, we'll explore the different biases that exist in hiring and provide some ways they can be removed from your company's decision-making process.

How bias exists in the hiring process

As we said in the intro, selecting an ideal candidate is a subjective decision. You can't run a candidate's resume through a machine that tells you who the best one is or perfectly score their answers to interview questions. You instead have to collect as much information as possible and make a judgement call.

Even if you fancy yourself an open-minded person who is willing to work with people of all backgrounds, your decision making is still influenced by what's known as "unconscious bias." All your life experiences, whether you consciously recall them or not, impact how you think and feel. That means even though you may strive to hire the best person for a role, the judgement calls you make can be skewed by factors you're not aware of.

There are various biases that make their way into the hiring process. Some are deeply ingrained, making them apparent yet hard to overcome. Others are difficult to notice at all, so companies never take the initial step toward eliminating them.

Before we get into the different ways your company can have a fair and balanced hiring process, let's explore the common biases that exist in the first place:

Gender

It's no secret that women still lag behind men in both career opportunities and compensation. Men have dominated the working world for so long and are still the gatekeepers in the vast majority of industries and companies.

Women face numerous biases when applying for jobs, from assumptions about leadership qualities to questions about their ability to balance career and family obligations. Many companies are proactively bringing gender balance and wage inequality to their organizations but the issues are so entrenched in society that they can't be resolved overnight.

Ethnic background

It should come as no surprise that racial biases persist in hiring. While most people don't share their ethnicity on their resume, it can become apparent through their LinkedIn photo, the country where they attended school, or when they come in for an interview.

Age

Older professionals often feel job searching is a young person's game. They may feel that a company is reluctant to hire them if retirement is on the horizon or if they lack the latest skills employers are seeking.

On the flipside, young job seekers can feel that employers make assumptions about their maturity or professionality due to a lack of life experience.

Names

A person's name gives away their gender or even their ethnicity, in some cases. But even more than that, people with common, easy-to-pronounce names often have an easier time getting hired. Some recruiters don't want to go through the awkwardness of struggling to pronounce a candidate's name, so they opt not to contact them at all.

Education

It's easy to make assumptions about a person's intelligence based on the academic prestige of the college they attended. While that's fair to an extent, keep in mind that there are numerous reasons why people end up going to a particular university that have nothing to do with how smart they are.

Some companies strive to hire graduates of top-tier universities but many others have found that the criteria doesn't equate to job success.

Work experience

Referencing work experience as a bias might sound odd but some people can get infatuated with a candidate who previously worked for a certain company. However, what they did in their last job matters far more than the company they were an employee of. For example, someone who headed a project at a lesser-known company probably has more leadership

experience than someone who was a worker bee at a Fortune 500 company.

These are only a few of the many biases that can occur when hiring. Being aware of the factors that influence decision making is the first step in having a completely fair hiring process.

Tips for a bias-free hiring process

Now that we've covered how biases can leak into the hiring process, let's focus on what really matters. Finding the best person for the position with a bias-free hiring process.

Start with a well-defined job profile

A bias-free hiring process starts with defining the exact type of professional you want to hire. The first thing you should do is consider the problem or challenge your company needs to overcome. Then think about what it will take to resolve the issue at hand. If you conclude that hiring someone for a specific position is the solution, determine what skills, abilities, work experience, and knowledge they'll need to have.

Creating a profile for a role should be a collaboration between the hiring manager and a recruiter. The hiring manager knows the problem and has an idea of the skills that will be required to take it on. They also know where the role will fit in on their team and the level of experience that is necessary.

The recruiter can take the hiring managers explanation and package it into a job profile. They can then round it out with their own research based on the hiring landscape and convert the finished product into a job description.

The job profile should be detailed and used throughout the hiring process. Every member of the hiring team should be familiar with it so they know the exact factors to consider.

Be conscious of the language in job descriptions

A well-written and descriptive job description attracts the right candidates and convinces them to apply. It should sum up all the role requirements defined in the job profile so it draws in people with the right professional background.

It's often overlooked but some minor words used in job descriptions can deter certain people from applying. The most obvious is using gender-specific pronouns when referencing the ideal candidate (i.e. "He will lead our sales efforts"). However, most recruiters are savvy enough to understand that gender-neutral pronouns ("They will lead our sales efforts") should be used instead.

A less obvious way to imply bias in job descriptions is through adjectives. For example, "driven," "assertive," and "confident" are masculine-coded, while "cooperative," "honest," and "supportive" have a feminine connotation. When it comes to age, adjectives like "energetic" and "tech-savvy" imply that you're seeking a young person.

That's not to say that you shouldn't use these adjectives in your job description. But if you find you're not receiving a diverse mix of applicants, it could be worth reviewing the word choice.

Have a diverse hiring team

One of the most surefire ways to make a fair hiring decision is to involve multiple people in the process. Leaving hiring decisions to one person, or even a few people, will inevitably lead to a selection influenced by preconceived notions. They can choose a person with a background that

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they prefer, without hearing other opinions, or being asked to justify their preference.

It's important not to overwhelm a candidate with a long, drawn out hiring process consisting of too many interviews. But you should still assemble a hiring team made up of the right people who can keep each other fair and honest. Here are a few roles worth considering on your team:

* **Recruiter** – The recruiter oversees the screening each applicant and having initial conversations with people who align with the job profile. They can then pass the most promising ones onto the hiring manager for a more in-depth interview.

* **Hiring manager** – The hiring manager will likely have multiple conversations with candidates who make it to the final stages of the hiring process. They'll be very familiar with the job profile but can still be influenced by biases the more they get to know a candidate.

* **Hiring team members** – The people who will work closely with the future hire should be asked to participate in the interview stage. While they should seek someone who will be a good team member, that often means preferring someone who looks and sounds like them and their colleagues. We'll cover how to handle this bias in the next bullet point.

* **Someone from another team** – Some companies have finalists participate in a "culture fit interview" with someone from another part of the company. It's often a good idea to have the person who conducts this interview come from a team that is very different from the one the new hire will join to counter biases the immediate team members may have.

* **Someone from outside the company** – Asking a candidate to speak with a person familiar with the role but not part of your

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company is a great way to overcome biases. They'll have no reason to be influenced by their own sentiments and can focus entirely on skills and experience. Consult with your hiring manager and ask if they can recommend anyone.

If each person evaluates candidates using the job profile, they should form similar conclusions. Ideally, everyone will prefer the same candidate but there might be some variation if multiple people are qualified for the position.

Have a consistent interview process

The highest risk for biases leaking into the hiring process is in the interview stage. Prior to it, most the focus will be on the candidate's resume but now your hiring team members can get caught up on appearance, body language, and other factors that can sway their opinions.

It's important to be wary of biases that can occur during interviews and take steps to prevent them. Your team should strive to consistently evaluate each candidate but that is often easier said than done. Here are few ways you can put that practice into action when conducting job interviews:

* **Ask each candidate the same questions** – Some people prefer to forgo typical interview questions and just have a conversation with the candidate. This approach does have some upside but also opens the door for the interviewer to be influenced by details unrelated to role fit.

  We recommend each interviewer come up with a list of questions to ask all the candidates and carefully document their answers. It's not a perfect solution since the interviewer can still be impacted by certain words or the confidence in which the answer is delivered. However, taking notes lets the interviewer compare answers afterwards.

* **Focus on role-related questions** – The bulk of the interview should focus on questions related to the position. That doesn't mean you have to go into the room and get right to business since that can make the candidate feel uncomfortable. But you shouldn't be overly concerned with how they answer questions that aren't job focused.

  Think of questions about hobbies and interests as icebreakers to help the candidate settle in. And keep in mind that they're giving filtered responses that are appropriate for a job interview so don't think someone is intelligent or driven if they say they enjoy reading or learning new skills in their free time.

* **Have each interviewer complete a candidate rubric** – You can use the job profile to create a rubric interviewers use to score each candidate. Include the most important qualities you seek and ask the hiring team to rate each person on a 1-to-5 scale for each one. You can also allow them to share their overall opinion on the people they meet with but the final decision should be based on rubric scores.

* **Have each candidate compete an evaluation exercise** – One of the best ways to eliminate hiring biases and find the best person for the job is through evaluation exercises. You can use your job profile to create a take home test and measure each candidate's aptitude for the job.

  Some people perform well in the job interviews and others aren't as skilled at selling themselves and their abilities. But candidate evaluation exercises help you zero-in on the person who has the highest proficiency for the job.