



# Promoting inclusive recruitment

A de-biasing checklist  
for smarter decision-making

VERCIDA Consulting  
The Global Inclusion Company

**V** VERCIDA  
CONSULTING

We at VERCIDA Consulting have a simple mission: to transform the world of work into inclusive, innovative and high performing environments. With science and psychology underpinning our approach to inclusive management, we assist our global clients to challenge established ways of thinking and doing diversity.

## Our approach

Unlike many other diversity and inclusion consultancies our approach is underlined by four core principles:

1

### **Science knows best:**

We push the boundaries by helping organisations to become catalysts for change. We do this by drawing on up-to-date research from the fields of social psychology, neuro-psychology and behavioral science.

2

### **Partnership:**

Partnership underpins everything we do. It is the foundation stone of how we work with our clients to meet their challenges. Partnership helps us to develop inclusive leaders by drawing on their insights, knowledge and experiences.

3

### **Thinking beyond the safe option:**

As the global environment becomes ever more complex and uncertain, our natural human bias is to gravitate towards people who are like us. We challenge our clients to think beyond this safe option and to transform their work cultures by embracing the benefits of diversity.

4

### **Thinking global diversity / acting local inclusion:**

Business talent is both global and diverse. For many of our clients a global mindset to managing diverse teams is the new norm. However, local cultures continue to influence how businesses implement diversity and inclusion goals and strategies. We believe that taking into account local traditions and cultural norms is key to the success of business local.

# Introduction

In order to create change, organisations need to let go of the old ways of doing recruitment and adopt an evidenced based approach. Only then will we see a move towards inclusive and bias-free decision-making.

**To assist with promoting bias-free recruitment VERCIDA Consulting have created this evidenced-based de-biasing checklist.**

This document sets out the different types of bias that are likely to arise at each stage of the recruitment process. It covers job design, advertising, candidate attraction & search, shortlisting, interviewing and candidate de-briefing. We have also provided, under each section, a simple checklist to assist organisations to mitigate bias and to promote inclusive recruitment.

Much of the content of this **de-biasing checklist** may seem like common sense. You may be tempted to skip rather obvious questions. However, it is the process of deliberately subjecting our decisions to this structured scrutiny which gives this de-biasing checklist its unique contribution to inclusive decision-making.

Use the checklist to identify your areas of strength as well as areas for improvement. Do ensure that you involve a range of stakeholders when answering each question. This is because the rewards are two-fold – a reduction in bias thinking, together with an uplift in inclusive decision-making.

“The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results”

Albert Einstein

# The mind-bugs that matter:

## Exploring unconscious bias within the recruitment process

Harvard psychologists Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald have shown how human beings have a natural tendency to place individuals into social categories. Social categories can be based on visual cues such as gender, cultural background, age, height or body size. They can also be based on factors such as social background, job roles, religious identity or political affiliation.

The process of social categorisation is a not a neutral one. Human being make judgements of others bases on factors such as appearance, gender, cultural background and so on. And it is this process of judgement making that falls into bias with hiring decisions.

Daniel Kahneman, the behavioural psychologists, has shown how our decision-making process is governed by a complex process of pattern recognition or what he calls 'heuristics'. Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald term these 'mind-bugs'. The unconscious brain uses social categories to make implicit, or unconscious judgements about people who are similar to us and people who are different from us. Critically, we are more likely to form positive associations towards people who look, sound and think like us. We are also more likely to form negative associations towards people who are different from us.



### For example:

Constant exposure to images and stories of men as lawyers, doctors, accountants, detectives, plumbers or bus drivers via the media, personal encounters and work environments reinforce our implicit associations resulting in what is often referred to as 'hard-wired' bias.

Out dated stereotypes also continue to influence perceptions of women at work, as charity workers, careers, primary school teachers, cleaners or shop assistants.

These implicit associations then influence expectations of who should be accountants, plumbers, careers or shop assistants within hiring decisions.

# Bias within job design

Person specifications and job descriptions are often the first stage of the candidate selection process. For the employer, these provide a frame of reference for the skills and attributes which they desire. For the candidate, the job description and the person specification act as first impression documents. They provide explicit information together with subtle hints about the culture of the business seeking to make the hire.

Research by organisations such as Catalysts tells us that the words and phrases that are used in job descriptions and person specifications can have a significant impact on a prospective candidate's decision to apply for the role.

For example, words such as 'competition', 'superior' and 'independent' are more likely to appeal to male candidates, whereas words such as 'loyal', responsible' and 'supportive' are more likely to appeal to female candidates.





RECOMMENDATIONS AND RATIONALE	YES	NO
<p>Has the job description and person specification been recently reviewed?</p> <p>Taking a job description and person specification off the shelf is tempting but jobs change and you can inherit the biases of the person who drew up the description, and the era in which they did that.</p>		
<p>Has the job description and person specification been reviewed for bias language?</p> <p>Naturalising bias using language proofing tools such as Textio or Unitive is likely to increase applications from diverse candidates.</p>		
<p>Is this a role which is overwhelmingly occupied by a particular group of people?</p> <p>We should be extra cautious when current job holders are from one particular gender, social, age or ethnic group (for example), as the bias will then be at its most potent.</p>		

# Bias in job adverts

Job adverts often contain both words and images that project stereotypes of men and women, different cultures, the young and old and other social groups based on factors such as disability, sexual orientation and social background.

Stereotypes used in job adverts reinforce existing assumptions and biases about the types of people you are seeking to hire. Images and words can promote affinity bias, in-group bias and gender benevolent bias.

They can also trigger stereotype threat amongst minority candidates. Stereotype threat occurs when an individual is at risk of confirming negative stereotypes about their own group. This can lead to judgements being made on group membership as opposed to

being judged on individual skills and competencies. For example, a black candidate is more likely to be aware of their social identity when a job advert contains images of only white people. If the advert for a senior executive role, contains only male images, this can reinforce the 'think manager think male' gender bias.





RECOMMENDATIONS AND RATIONALE	YES	NO
<p>Do the recruitment materials depict a wide range of social groups?</p> <p>Having diverse images in job adverts is more likely to 'nudge' minority job seekers to apply for the role.</p>		
<p>Have you stated your commitment to, for instance, flexible working and agile working?</p> <p>Proactively informing job seekers of your commitment to things that may matter to them is more likely to influence their decision to apply or otherwise.</p>		
<p>Have you expressively stated your commitment to hiring diverse candidates?</p> <p>Sentences such as, "As part of our efforts to reflect our diverse customers, we at (company x) are actively seeking to hire more (insert gender, ethnicity etc) candidates."</p> <p>This type of sentence is more impactful than generic commitment statements to workplace diversity and inclusion.</p>		

# Bias in candidate attraction and search

It is often tempting when hiring in a highly networked world to draw on our immediate business networks through social media sites such as LinkedIn, as well as other business contacts. There are many advantages to this approach, including speed of response, cost efficiencies and confidence from those we know and trust to put forward good quality candidates.

Of course, this approach also poses a number of risks. While many of our business associates and contacts have a wide variety of skills, experience and knowledge, there is a danger that we limit our thinking and reach to a diverse range of candidates through groupthink and source bias.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND RATIONALE	YES	NO
<p>Have you explicitly set out your expectations on diverse short-listing and set diversity targets to internal teams as well as through your supply chain – recruitment agencies and search companies?</p> <p>Using a comply or explain model sets clear expectations to suppliers on the benefits of meeting your requirements as well as possible consequences of not meeting these.</p>		
<p>Are you using specialist companies such as <a href="http://vercida.com">vercida.com</a> to diversify your candidate pool, by highlighting your commitment to diversity and inclusion?</p> <p>Showcasing your commitment to diversity and inclusion is likely to increase applications from diverse candidates.</p>		
<p>Are you working in partnership with specialist not-for-profit organisations?</p> <p>Working in partnership with specialist organisations helps with candidate reach. It also helps to mitigate any pre-conceptions a diverse candidate may have about your business.</p>		



# Bias in candidate short-listing

CVs and application forms contain information that creates first impressions, or mind-bugs of a candidate, in the minds of hiring managers. A CV or application form contains information which is vital to making an informed assessment of a candidate's suitability for interview – work experience, skills and achievements, education. However, there are many data points which can lead to bias judgements.

**Affinity bias** plays out strongly in short-listing processes. Affinity can be formed from information such as which university a candidate attended, a previous employer they had or the job sector they work in. Affinity and emotional tagging is also attached to hobbies and interests.

Hiring managers will often have a pre-defined image in their heads of what they perceive as the ideal candidate. This is informed by a classic cognitive bias, known as the **representative heuristic**, which occurs when a candidate is representative of (looks like, sounds like) the population they are being recruited into. Information contained in the CV or in the application form can trigger **confirmation bias**. This results in certain groups advancing to interview and others being rejected at short-listing. Confirmation bias is the tendency to look for or interpret information which confirms existing thoughts and beliefs.



## Mitigating bias in candidate short-listing

RECOMMENDATIONS AND RATIONALE	YES	NO
<p>Have you introduced 'blind' decision-making in shortlisting – removing personal information including name, university, hobbies and interests, to ensure that shortlisting criteria is based in desired skills and competencies only?</p> <p>Apps such as <b>blendoor</b> obscures the names and photos of candidates in order to combat unconscious bias and facilitate diverse and inclusive recruiting in tech companies. Other apps you could consider include <b>gapjumpers</b>.</p> <p>These apps help to mitigate bias and to promote inclusive recruitment. This will likely lead to an increase in the number of diverse candidates progressing to interview.</p>		
<p>Have you involved a range of diverse stakeholders when reviewing CVs or application forms?</p> <p>This helps to mitigate groupthink and bias blindspots.</p>		
<p>Have you introduced mandatory short-listing for women or minority groups?</p> <p>Evidence from analysis of the 'Rooney rule' in the US shows that a minority candidate is more likely to be appointed if they get an opportunity to present their skills at interview.</p>		

# Bias at interview

Many organisations use structured interviews as a process to ensure hiring decisions are fair and free from bias. The reality is, bias creeps into the job interview.

**Affinity bias** continues to influence our judgements of candidates at interview. Factors such as social accent and appearance form first impressions. Other points of affinity that emerge through the interview could be a candidate's style and manner, or information such as personal interests.

**Confirmation bias** is likely to be triggered during the interview. For example, a first impression of a candidate may be formed by reading a CV or an application form. At the interview, panel members

will often ask questions which are designed to confirm the first impressions.

Another classic bias that is often observed at the interview stage is what is known as the '**halo effect**'. Daniel Kahneman describes this as a good name for a common bias. The halo effect occurs when we find one attribute really attractive in a job candidate and this then colours our view of the candidate's total skills and competencies. For example, if a candidate dresses smartly we may assume (if we value this) that they will put together a slick client presentation. The opposite of this halo effect is the **horns effect** – if we find one attribute unattractive in a job candidate this may then colour our view of the candidate's total skills and competencies in a negative way.

Finally, the interview setting is one where **stereotype threat** can re-emerge. A black candidate, for example, is more likely to be aware of their social identity in an interview situation where the interview panel is all white. This principle also applies to gender and other social factors, such as age.





RECOMMENDATIONS AND RATIONALE	YES	NO
<p>Is the interview panel visibly diverse – gender, ethnicity and age?</p> <p>Having a diverse interview panel sends a positive signal to the candidate that the company values diversity and inclusion. And that there are role models within the organisation that they can relate to.</p>		
<p>Do you use group interview processes, and follow pre-set questions as opposed to just 1:1 interviews?</p> <p>Structured group interviews help to mitigate affinity bias.</p>		
<p>Do you use a scoring system and aggregate scores before the de-briefing?</p> <p>Using a scoring system and aggregating candidate scores before the final candidate de-brief helps to mitigate biases by focusing on evidenced-based information.</p>		

# Bias during candidate de-briefing

Although hiring managers often use scoring systems and question banks to govern and structure the interview, they often go off-script during the candidate de-briefing. Questions around **organisation fit** are often raised, which is code for 'to what extent is this candidate like us'?

This is a form of **in-group bias** that often over-rules evidenced-based decision-making. These processes are often reinforced by **source bias**. This is the tendency to add greater weight to information from a source that we are familiar with, or one than holds authority and power. In the interview or at the de-brief, it's often the most senior person in the room that holds this sway and influence.

Other common biases that we observe in the candidate de-briefing are **attribution error** and **decision fatigue**. Attribution error is the tendency to relate behaviours to personality rather than the situation the person might be in. For example, if a person is nervous in an interview, the interviewer may assume that the person is of a nervous disposition. The interviewer is more likely to do this if the candidate is unlike them, and less likely to do so if the candidate is of the same social group. This fosters **in-group bias**, or if they have some kind of emotional connection to the candidate, fosters **affinity bias**. This means attribution error is more likely to impact candidates who are different from hiring managers. Of course, minority candidates may experience this to a greater degree than majority candidates due to **stereotypes threat**, which can create greater emotional load in the interview.

Decision fatigue occurs when our cognitive resources – mental energy and willpower – become depleted due to a succession of decisions. After having a full day of interviewing, interviewers will be prone to decision fatigue late in the afternoon, and so their ability to judge a candidate objectively is more likely to be hampered.

## Mitigating bias during candidate de-briefing

RECOMMENDATIONS AND RATIONALE	YES	NO
<p><b>Are you making decisions when you are most alert?</b></p> <p>Interviewing or discussing candidates when you are stressed, tired or rushing greatly increases the likelihood of bias influencing your final decision.</p>		
<p><b>Do you find yourself or a colleague pushing for one particular candidate with an average score?</b></p> <p>Intuitive thoughts and feelings often influence candidate de-briefing conversations. This may indicate unconscious likeability.</p>		
<p><b>Have you introduced a ‘devil’s advocate’ in the process?</b></p> <p>Using a devil’s advocate methodology helps assessors and hiring managers to make fairer and more inclusive decisions. Pushing for evidence helps to reduce bias playing out in the final decision.</p>		



## Three other key biases that impact the recruitment process:

### Status quo bias

Hiring managers simply have a preference for types of people who they are familiar with. This bias works against groups that we are less familiar with – think introverts in a sales environment, women in construction or older workers in social media marketing roles.



### Anchoring

Anchoring is the tendency to rely heavily on first impressions when making a decision. In recruitment, the anchor could simply be the type of person already 'in mind' to fill the vacant position. Once set, the anchor influences the entire recruitment process from job design to final appointment.



### Selective perception

This is a process whereby hiring managers pay more attention to information from candidates that fit their existing world views, whilst ignoring or dis-guarding information that challenges existing thoughts, values and beliefs. It is often informed by in-group bias and affinity bias. The outcome is that selective perception positively impacts candidates who are similar to the hiring manager and negatively impacts an organisation's ambition of hiring more diverse talent.

## Further recommendations:

1. **Use employee motoring data to inform your approach to inclusive recruitment.**

Monitoring, tracking and analysing employee data ensures smart targeting and smarter results.

2. **Ensure managers and others have been tested for bias using online assessments such as the Harvard Implicit Association Test, or Implicitly<sup>®</sup> Testing** raises personal and group awareness, and by doing so, helps to mitigate bias playing out in actual decisions.

3. **Set diversity goals and targets.**

By agreeing inclusive recruitment goals, targets and KPIs, organizations increase accountability in decision-making. This further assists with bias mitigation.



# Glossary of biases

There are many cognitive and social biases. The 15 list below covers some of the common biases that influence our decisions within a recruitment context.

Affinity bias	<p>The tendency to hire people who are like us. Often called the ‘mini-me’ effect, affinity bias plays out when people are similar to us – culture, background, personality – or remind us of someone we like.</p> <p>For example, hiring managers may be more likely to hire a candidate who graduated from the same university as them, worked in a sector they are familiar with, share interests or have a historical link to something they like.</p>
Anchoring	<p>Anchoring is the tendency to rely heavily on first impressions when making a decision.</p> <p>In recruitment, the anchor could simply be having a type of person already ‘in mind’ to fill the vacant position. Once set, the anchor can influence the entire recruitment process from job design to final appointment.</p>
Attribution error	<p>The tendency to relate behaviours to personality rather than the situation the person might be in.</p> <p>For example, if a person is nervous in an interview, the interviewer may assume that the person is generally of a nervous disposition. This particular bias is more likely to happen if the interviewer finds little in common with the applicant.</p>
Confirmation bias	<p>The tendency to look for information, or interpret behaviours that confirm existing thoughts and beliefs.</p> <p>For example, reading specific details on a CV or application form may inform a ‘first impression’ of a candidate. At the interview, panel members may ask questions which are designed to confirm those first impressions.</p>



Decision fatigue	<p>Decision fatigue occurs when our mental energy and willpower become diminished due to a prolonged period of decision-making.</p> <p>For example, during a full day of interviewing, interviewers may develop decision fatigue late in the afternoon. This potentially hampers their ability to judge a candidate objectively.</p>
Gender benevolent bias	<p>The practice of making assumptions about job opportunities based on gender. This is often well-meaning but in practice supports traditional gender roles and may restrict career opportunities.</p> <p>For example, managers may not assign a global project with extensive travel to a female colleague who has recently returned from maternity leave because they assume that they would not want to be away from their new child.</p>
Groupthink	<p>Groupthink occurs when hiring managers make poor decisions because the group's pressure for conformity prevents discussions of alternatives. A group is especially vulnerable to groupthink when its members are similar in background, when the group is insulated from outside opinions, or when there are no clear rules for decision-making.</p> <p>For example, a group of hiring managers are less likely to challenge each other's views on a particular candidate when the hiring group share many defining characteristics such as age, background and gender. It is also an issue when they do not follow a de-biasing checklist!</p>

<p>Halo / horns effect</p>	<p>This occurs when we find one attribute particularly attractive or unattractive in a job candidate and then allow that to colour our view of the candidate's total skills and competencies.</p> <p>For example, if a candidate is very well presented in interview, we may assume that they will also put together well-presented client presentations and vice versa.</p>
<p>In-group bias</p>	<p>It is well-recognised in social psychology that people define themselves by social groups. Individuals who share common qualities are recognised as 'in-group' members. Those who do not have these qualities are seen as 'out-group' members.</p> <p>For example, coming from the same town, sharing a social accent or graduating from the same university as an interviewer, or sharing a cultural background, can stimulate in-group thinking which may lead to bias in the recruitment process.</p>
<p>Representative heuristic</p>	<p>A classic cognitive bias, this occurs when a candidate is representative of (looks like/sounds like) the population they are being recruited into.</p> <p>For example, if an organisation is hiring for a senior manager role in a global manufacturing company that is dominated by white, tall, and middle-class men, a candidate who also matches that description is likely to benefit from this particular bias.</p>
<p>Source bias</p>	<p>The tendency to add greater weight to information from a source that we are familiar with.</p> <p>For example, we may seek a second opinion on a candidate from a colleague whose opinion we value. The problem is that we are more likely to value the opinion of colleagues who are in our in-group.</p>

<p>Status quo bias</p>	<p>Status quo bias is a bias towards the familiar and a preference for things to stay the same.</p> <p>In a recruitment context inertia can play a key role when hiring managers and recruiters opt for candidates that are similar to the types of people already working in the organisation, rather than what may be best for the organisation.</p>
<p>Selective perception</p>	<p>Selective perception is a process wherein people cherry-pick information that is aligned to their existing worldviews, whilst ignoring or disregarding information that challenges existing thoughts, values or beliefs.</p> <p>For example, hiring managers may pay more attention to candidates who are already in their in-group and score them more favourably compared to out-group candidates.</p>
<p>Stereotype Threat</p>	<p>Stereotype threat occurs when an individual is at risk of confirming negative stereotypes about their own group and being judged based on group membership as opposed to individual merit.</p> <p>For example, a black candidate is more likely to be aware of their social identity in an interview situation when the interview panel is all white. The anxiety of confirming a negative stereotype can then affect performance.</p>
<p>Think Manager-Think Male</p>	<p>This is a classic cognitive bias that influences perceptions of gender roles and leadership.</p> <p>Hiring managers recruiting for an executive position will be more inclined to associate men with classic leadership qualities and attributes than they are women. This can result in men gaining an unfair advantage in the recruitment process.</p>





To find out how we can help you  
to transform through inclusion  
contact our team of experts.

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