

Eliminate bias to hire the best

*Standardized questions,
panel-style interviews
reduce risks, costs*

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Consider the following scenarios: Two qualified candidates, one in her 20s and one in his 50s, apply for a position in advertising — but only the woman is interviewed. An overweight man applies for an executive position at a financial services firm but is turned away despite his high skills and excellent references. The employers give what seem like fair reasons for the hiring choices: The 20-something is a better fit with the advertising agency's culture and there are concerns the overweight man might not have the energy required for a high-stress executive position.

Countless organizations say things like, "We'd love an experienced vice-president," "We need an MBA" or "We need an accountant." In many instances, there are legitimate business reasons for focusing on a specific skill set, which is called intentional bias. But when unintentional and personal bias impact the hiring process, many organizations miss out on hiring the best person for the job.

Employing with bias brings significant business risk, when what should be insignificant factors — such as gender, age, looks or social status — distract an employer from objectively evaluating and hiring the best candidates.

And when there are performance issues or retention problems, it costs an organization, not just in dollars to cover the financial costs of attrition — including lost opportunities, severance and rehiring — but in potential reputational risk should an organization become known as a "revolving door" and not a desirable workplace.

More than ever, organizations need to make a conscious effort to fully understand and prevent bias, stereotypes and assumptions from adversely affecting the interview process.

Random processes produce random results

Interviews are the most commonly used component of hiring but research has found a traditional job interview is only slightly better than flipping a coin in predicting job performance. Many interviewers think they have good instincts about candidates and can use them to make good hiring decisions, but this is not always the case. Not many interviewers are trained and certified, so it's often the untrained who are making the majority of critical hiring decisions.

Interviewers often ask the wrong questions and use inconsistent evaluation techniques. Additionally, many interviewers tend to reach a decision about an applicant in the first three to five minutes and then spend the remaining interview time rationalizing their decision. These quick judgments contribute to bias that interferes with the quality and accuracy of assessing applicants.

The reality is many interviewers unintentionally hire people like themselves, with similar styles and personalities, because they feel comfortable with them.

Steps to eliminate bias

Effective interviewing takes careful planning and effort so decisions are based on relevant, sound information, not just first impressions. Structured interviews produce better judgments and an unbiased interviewing process should be based on the following principles.

Clearly defined job requirements: Clearly defining the key job requirements is the first step to eliminating bias. This is more than a job description — it's a detailed understanding of the skills and leadership competencies candidates need to succeed. This document becomes the basis to create standardized interview questions to enable interviewers to objectively judge whether candidates possess the required skills and competencies.

Standard interview questions: Once standard interview questions are developed, interviewers should ask all candidates the same series of job-related, behaviour-based questions to make objective comparisons between candidates, rather than relying on intuition or partial information. Before conducting any interviews, interviewers should

determine appropriate responses for each question and then use a one to five rating to increase objectivity, reduce interviewer bias and improve the accuracy of candidate assessment.

Interviewers should recognize, during an interview, applicants are probably the best they will ever be. Promises and past experience are not necessarily a guarantee of future performance. Behavioural questions usually start with "Give us an example..." to help reduce that smokescreen by asking for actual performance results.

An objective interview process: Structure is equally important for the candidate evaluation and rating process. Ideally, there should be multiple interviewers who represent all stakeholders. A panel-style interview provides the most unbiased approach. For a candidate, it's her one opportunity to make a good first impression. For the interviewers, it means all are present at the same time, asking the same questions and hearing the same responses.

Take notes during an interview and debrief immediately following the last interview, using a scoring sheet to rate each answer to assess the candidates. Use examples, not hunches, to support ratings and don't rely on memory, which can be biased.

By consistently applying the above principles, an organization will increase efficiency and accuracy while eliminating unintentional bias by:

- focusing the interview on relevant job behaviours
- encouraging the applicant to describe his behaviour rather than providing rehearsed answers
- fairly comparing candidates through consistency in questions and evaluation.

Companies can no longer afford to allow bias to affect hiring processes and decisions. Smart organizations are preparing for the next round in the war for talent by taking the necessary steps to assess hiring practices and by professionally training interviewers to eliminate bias to find and hire the best possible people.

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