

NEOGOV

HOW TO REVAMP THE INTERVIEW PROCESS TO MINIMIZE BIAS

2020

DIVERSITY IN THE WORKFORCE

Diversity in the workforce has long been a growing concern, particularly for public sector and higher education organizations that are expected to be representative of the people they serve.

WHAT IS IMPLICIT BIAS?

Most people would like to believe that they are fair and unbiased in their judgements. However, there's another type of bias – implicit bias – that they're likely to be less aware of but can still inform their opinions.

Implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which can result in both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and can be impossible to control. They can even contradict a person's belief or value system. When they inevitably enter the fray of recruiting and hiring, usually only structural change can eliminate their impact on the hiring process.

While on the surface changing your recruiting approach may sound like a huge undertaking, it's time to move beyond our old methods of building workforces that have directly or indirectly positioned candidates from minority groups at a disadvantage. Changing systemic processes to address inequities or underrepresentation in the workplace requires lots of work, and it can be an uncomfortable subject to broach. Fortunately, small incremental steps can make a significant difference. Here are changes you can make now to your organization's interviewing processes to better assess candidate qualifications without letting personal, irrelevant characteristics cloud judgement.





DIVERSIFY YOUR HIRING COMMITTEE

If you boast about your organization's diversity, but everyone your candidate interviews with is the same ethnicity, gender, or from the same generation, that might put doubt in their mind as to whether you can walk the walk when it comes to providing an equitable workforce. For candidates, particularly from minority communities, representative diversity in a workforce may make or break their impression of your organization.

So, to build a truly diverse workforce, it's vital that that practice is already reflected in who currently works for your organization -- and that your candidates speak to potential future co-workers of different backgrounds. Generally, the hiring manager, hiring manager's manager, and relevant team members and/or interdepartmental collaborators should be on the shortlist of people to help interview candidates. If this group doesn't accurately represent the diversity you seek, then you have some structural work to do to rectify that situation. As a member of HR, you must ensure that hiring managers in all of your departments are prioritizing diversity as they select not only who gets interviewed, but who gets hired. If this is a pain point in your organization, you probably need to stay more closely involved during the entire hiring process, and be prepared to address any concerns of candidates.

AVOID "LIKE-ME" SYNDROME

Another reason to diversify your interviewers? Some experts believe that people are more likely to hire people that are like them. This so-called "like me" syndrome can unduly influence an interviewer's opinion causing them to like someone for personal reasons or shared affinities, rather than based on their qualifications for the role.

"It is important to have a diverse hiring committee and bring diverse views in the recruitment process [because] a collaborative hiring process helps people to check their biases and uncover blind spots."

DR. PRAGYA AGARWAL,
AUTHOR OF SWAY: UNRAVELLING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

"CAN THEY DO IT?" VS "HAVE THEY DONE IT?"

Harvard Business School professor Francesca Gino noted in a Harvard Business Review article that unstructured interviews were “often unreliable for predicting job success." The more you base criteria for qualified candidates on facts, the less room for unconscious bias in the interview process. But how do you take something that has always been based on a candidate’s performance in the interview and translate it into something with fewer bias landmines? You can start by having your hiring managers tailor questions about a candidate’s experience around what they’ve already demonstrated a competency in, as opposed to whether they can do something.

"Asking for concrete, real-life examples of a skillset helps 'calibrate your judgment to see how Candidate A compares to Candidate B.'"

PROF. FRANCESCA GINO, HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

For example, if you ask two candidates the same question with regard to their ability to accomplish a task (e.g., “Can you make spreadsheets with pivot tables?”) and they both say “yes,” you’re back at square one and may fall into the trap of judging candidates based on subjective reasons that have no bearing on their qualifications for the job.

Asking for previous work samples or administering skills tests (e.g., “Please use this data to create a pivot table”) are good ways to see plainly which candidate is most adept. This takes the guesswork out of it and ensures that the most qualified person is hired, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, or any other personal identity that might unduly result in their rejection. It also saves the organization the headache of hiring someone who over promised and under delivered on their skillset.



RELY MORE ON RUBRICS, LESS ON SUBJECTIVITY

Harvard Kennedy School's Director of the Women and Public Policy Program Iris Bohnet has said that employers must "think broadly about ways to simplify and standardize the [hiring] process" in order to reduce the risk of unconscious bias. In addition to using previous work samples and skills testing, one way your hiring committee can do this is by sitting down early in the process -- preferably before the job is even posted -- to discuss the critical elements that would make up a successful candidate. Once you're armed with this list of skills and traits, you'll have a strict set of criteria to determine a candidate's eligibility during the interview.

Instead of providing your hiring committee with a traditional scorecard, create a rubric scale with specific criteria tied to each question to reduce the risk of subjectivity.

TRADITIONAL SCORECARD

	1 (Low)	2	3	4	5 (High)
Public Speaking					

RUBRIC SCALE

	1 (Low)	2	3	4	5 (High)
Rate the candidate based on experience according to this scale	Has never presented to a larger group than 50	Has presented 2-3 times to a group of 50 or more	Has presented 3-5 times to a group of 50 or more	Has presented 6-9 times to a group of 50 or more	Has presented >10 times to a group of more than 50
Public Speaking					

This is also a good time to decide which committee members should ask which rubric questions to judge based upon their role in the organization. Don't be afraid to have committee members ask some or all of the same questions -- if the scoring is generally consistent across the board, you'll know the entire team agrees about the candidate's prospects. Conversely, if there is disparity between committee members on the rubric, it could be a great opportunity to discuss frankly why each person ranked the candidate the way they did.

DEFINE WHAT MAKES A CULTURE FIT

And what about items that have traditionally been left to subjective discretion, such as candidate likeability or culture fit? There's nothing stopping you from ranking candidates on these using a 1-5 or 1-10 rubric as well, but be specific about what that means. It can certainly be a consideration before hiring someone, but defining what culture means in uncertain terms along with the other performance rankings will help minimize opportunities for bias.



Interested in learning more about ways to eliminate unconscious bias from your recruitment and hiring process? Contact NEOGOV to hear about our product suite that can help you closely analyze your candidate pool for diversity, reduce the risk of bias, and standardize interview practices.

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