

Applicant interviewers must work to neutralize their biases

Learn to recognize unconscious tendencies and weed them out

By: Rochester Business Journal Staff June 19, 2018

As a hiring manager, your top priority is (or should be) identifying the best talent for your team — period. It seems like a simple concept:



Shawn G. Baker

define the skill set you're seeking, interview qualified candidates, and hire the finalist that will best fit your business needs. Unfortunately, interviewer biases can complicate an organization's hiring strategy — often leading to ineffective hires, and sometimes even putting the company at risk of a discrimination lawsuit. The recruitment process should be as objective as possible; in theory, the most qualified candidate should always get the job. In reality, that's not always the case, for a variety of reasons. So, what can you do to ensure your organization is hiring the best talent?

Conscious vs. unconscious biases

Understand that biases affect virtually all organizations — and individuals. Essentially, there are two types of biases:

- Conscious bias refers to explicit feelings or opinions, often expressed through stereotyping, that impact an individual's decisions and behavior.
- Unconscious bias refers to unintentional thoughts or feelings that may impact behavior toward a specific subject matter.

The primary differentiator is that individuals displaying conscious bias are fully aware of their prejudices, whereas those experiencing unconscious bias are often completely unaware of their prejudicial tendencies.

Recognizing conscious bias

It may seem that only the most extremist individuals would display conscious biases, or outright prejudicial behavior — such as vehement racists, for example. However, conscious bias negatively affects hiring decisions in even the most sophisticated organizations.

Consider the common saying: "It's not *what* you know, it's *who* you know." Certainly, flexing one's network can be one of the best ways to learn about job opportunities. From a business standpoint, however, this mindset can be extremely damaging. We recently advised an organization that was seeking to bring on a strategic leader for a management role. The candidate pool consisted of several highly qualified external applicants, as well as a couple candidates who were referred to apply for the opening by current employees. Due to internal politics, the referrals were automatically invited for interviews, while the external candidates went through a thorough pre-screening before receiving an invitation to interview. In the end, the decision came down to two finalists: a highly qualified external candidate with no organizational ties, and a referred candidate with less impressive qualifications. The organization ended up selecting the referral.

Unfortunately, this is a relatively common scenario. Anecdotally, we advised an organization in examining exit interviews for employees who had left within 18 months of their start date. Of those, roughly 80 percent had been sourced through an employee referral program. As another example, we often see business leaders offer their children high-level positions within their organization, simply due to relation — without regard to the individual's actual experience. It's true that referral programs can be highly effective, but only if referred candidates are vetted as thoroughly as external candidates, and the ultimate selection process remains objective.

Outside of employee referrals, there are several other, more offensive examples of conscious biases that run rampant in Corporate America. Consider the law firm partner who only hires graduates from his alma mater, for example, or the CEO who only promotes men into leadership positions. Unfortunately, these are familiar scenarios for many organizations.

Recognizing unconscious bias

Unconscious bias is much more difficult to spot, as most individuals are unaware of their implicit tendencies. In many ways, unconscious biases can be more detrimental than outright prejudicial behavior, as these inclinations often go unnoticed while still significantly negatively affecting hiring strategies.

It's important to understand that all individuals are influenced by unconscious biases, and this doesn't make anybody inherently 'good' or 'bad.' From a psychological standpoint, we all use schemas and archetypes to quickly organize and categorize the information our brains are constantly processing on an automatic, unconscious level. This helps us to understand the world around us, and build a framework to predict the outcomes of future interactions. It's also impossible to change from a biological standpoint; it's simply how human cognition functions.

However, unconscious information processing can be detrimental when it leads to biased expectations, or prejudices, in order to fit the individual's schemata — or understanding of the world. Essentially, we tend to unconsciously gravitate toward concepts that fit neatly within our pre-defined schemata, avoiding unfamiliar situations. From a hiring perspective, this means that an interviewer's past experiences can affect their judgment of a potential candidate, without their conscious knowledge.

For example, an interviewer may have a pre-conceived idea of what an 'ideal candidate' looks like for a position. However, because of this bias, if the interviewer is presented with a qualified candidate who doesn't neatly fit into that archetype, they may choose to reject the candidate — despite their qualifications.

Mitigating interview biases

It's undeniable that diversity is valuable, but biases often prevent organizations from becoming totally inclusive. However, there are ways to ensure that your interview strategies remain as neutral and objective as possible:

- Before reviewing any candidate resumes, develop 3-5 targeted behavioral interview questions that will effectively, objectively measure candidates' competencies across the most critical position criteria.
- Develop a rubric to essentially 'score' candidates' responses to those specific behavioral questions.
- Regarding referrals, it's critical that anybody who refers a candidate for a position is excluded from the interview and decision-making processes. Likewise, anyone who must be involved in the interview process (i.e. direct supervisors) should be prohibited from referring candidates.

- Allow interviewers to meet with candidates in pairs, or consider a panel interview format.
- Immediately following the interviews, have the interviewers meet and de-brief on each candidate. Hearing others' perspectives on candidates can help to lessen the impact of unconscious biases.
- Obviously, disregard interviewer feedback that clearly shows a conscious bias for or against any candidate, unless it's specifically related to that individual's ability to perform the responsibilities of the job.
- Analyze the completed scoring rubrics to determine which candidate received the highest interview 'score.' Even if the group ultimately decides to hire a different candidate, for whatever reason, taking the step to actively compare the rubric results to the interviewers' verbal feedback, and challenging any discrepancies, will help to minimize or eliminate unconscious biases from the decision process.

Organizations can use a variety of strategies to lessen the impact of biases on the interview process. The most important first step, however, is to recognize that nearly every organization — and individual — is subject to biases. Only then is it possible to develop an objective interviewing strategy. In doing so, you can expect a more diverse, inclusive work environment; growth, as diversity in thought often opens the doors for new business opportunities; better employer branding; increased retention; and overall, continuous improvement.

Shawn Baker is the president of Cochran, Cochran & Yale, an executive search and human resources consulting firm based in Rochester.