CAHRS
Virtual
Working Group
Series:

Diversity,
Equity &
Inclusion

Session 2: Addressing Bias in Internal and External Hiring
March 10, 2021

For most employers today, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) have transformed from a mere pipe dream to a strategic imperative and business necessity. To achieve these goals, however, employers must acknowledge that bias can permeate virtually any aspect of their business and make a conscious choice to eliminate it. CAHRS member companies that attended this working group have begun to do just that, and came together to learn about how they can continue to address bias in their hiring processes.

Working group participants expressed interest in a range of topics such as attracting and retaining diverse talent, getting buy-in for equitable hiring practices across all employee groups, and best practices for eliminating out-of-date processes and quickly responding to the needs of increasingly diverse talent pools. In discussing these and other topics, three important lessons became apparent.

DISCUSSION TAKEAWAYS

1. ***One-size does not fit all.*** What works for some areas in your hiring process may not work for others. Considering the context in which bias must be reduced is oftentimes just as important as reducing biases themselves. To that end, solutions tailored to specific situations may be ideal for addressing some biases. For other biases, standardized practices can be more effective.
2. ***Culture matters.*** What works for some companies cannot work for all companies. In workplaces that are just starting to think about DE&I more seriously, overwhelming employees with the most up-to-date and progressive practices might actually create resistance to inclusive policies. Thinking carefully about your company's culture will help you implement strategic solutions that can be sustained in the long term. These solutions can be adapted later when more employee support has been garnered.
3. ***Hiring is good, retention is better.*** As one working group participant stated, "you can do everything in your power to get diverse talent but if you don't have a culture that accepts them, they're going to leave." Members of underrepresented groups often think about how they will fit into a company's culture when they are evaluating job opportunities. Making sure you have a culture that they can see themselves working in is imperative.

15 participants
from 13
CAHRS Companies:

American Express
Boston Scientific
Bloomberg
E&J Gallo Winery
Estée Lauder Companies
IBM
Johnson Controls
JPMorgan Chase
Merck
Procter & Gamble
Samsung
Terex
Verizon

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With these lessons in mind, the following are sets of practices discussed by attending working group members. They have been organized around two crucial components of the hiring process: attracting talent and selecting talent. Participants also called out the importance of the onboarding and other early socialization processes for increasing retention, though we spent much less time discussing these.

ATTRACTING TALENT

Conversations regarding talent attraction largely focused on how employers can change their job advertisements to attract diverse talent. It may seem trivial, but research has shown that minor changes in the wording of job advertisements can have a major impact on the composition of applicant pools. Different people respond differently to the same wording, so paying attention to the language used in your recruitment materials can help tremendously. Specific solutions include:

Reducing the number of job requirements. It is important to recognize the difference between what is required to do a job and what is desirable. Job descriptions should be stripped down to include only the most essential requirements. For example, is it really necessary that a new hire needs to have held the same position at a previous company? Research suggests there is little to no correlation between years of experience and subsequent job performance. This process often begins with HR business partners challenging hiring managers to think carefully about what is really needed for the job versus what is a "nice to have".

Removing gendered and racialized language. One working group company noticed their applicant pool skewed towards more men and found that women were not applying because the job descriptions featured wording that was too masculine. A number of participants are using third-party tools to help identify troublesome wording that is turning diverse talent away from job opportunities.

Emphasizing inclusive or collective job attributes. One company's job description emphasized individual sales quotas but found that doing so was disproportionately attractive to men. To address this, they began emphasizing team- and store-level sales quotas. The result was more women and minorities in their applicant pool.

Encouraging application regardless of qualifications. Even with these changes, qualified applicants may believe they are not able to do a job and self-select out of the hiring process before even applying. One company changed their job advertisements to include, "Even if you do not believe you meet 100% of the skills described for this role, please apply anyway." This edit greatly expanded the number of diverse applicants.

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SELECTING TALENT

Biases are often unconscious. Even those with the best intentions hold them, and this can make bias reduction practices especially difficult to implement. Having honest conversations with employees about how they feel when using these practices can make their implementation smoother. Being honest might even lead to employees actively looking for ways to reduce bias, as some working group companies experienced. Solutions for reducing bias in talent selection include:

Implementing "blind" selection practices. "Blinding" is a policy solution whereby potentially biasing and/or evaluation-irrelevant information is purposefully stripped from the evaluative process. For example, before hiring managers selected candidates to interview, one working group company masked resume information related to applicant characteristics like race and gender. This proved to be very successful and resulted in a more diverse applicant pool—an outcome supported by recent academic research. Indeed, research demonstrates that the adoption of blind selection processes (e.g., anonymizing resumes by stripping names) can boost the proportion of women and ethnic minorities making it to the interview stage.

Selecting for diverse applicant attributes. Other working group participants acknowledged that blinding can be a solution to bias but felt there is a conceptual inconsistency between omitting identity-related applicant attributes and trying to hire applicants with those attributes. If you are blind to what you are trying to change, then how can you change it? Prioritizing diverse applicant attributes is an alternative approach, but one that may require careful consideration—its success likely depends on culture and buy-in at all levels, and its implementation may inadvertently introduce new biases. Generally, blinding will be more likely to succeed as a diversity boosting strategy if the adoption of blinding policies (governing initial applicant evaluations, before interviews take place) are paired with attention to the solutions described above concerning attracting diverse talent (e.g., modifications to applications in order to boost the proportion of non-majority group applicants).

Structuring interviews. Several working group companies reported great success using structured interviews. In one of their simplest forms, structured interviews can be as easy as creating a bank of interview questions. A more advanced approach might involve a formal interview guide with specific questions for certain employee groups and instructions on how interviewers should conduct themselves.

Training interviewers. Another method of ensuring consistency across interviews is to train interviewers. One company said they have gone as far

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as removing hiring managers from the interview process. Instead, they have certified interviewers that receive online and in-person training and are required to shadow experienced interviewers. Interviewers are required to re-certify every few years to ensure their abilities are strong and they assess the right candidate qualities.

Using inclusive behavioral questions. One working group company began requiring hiring managers to ask applicants about challenges faced when working in diverse settings or experiences that increased their awareness of personal and cultural differences. Though initially uncomfortable for interviewers, these questions were well received by interviewees, and signaled that the company cares about inclusivity. Additionally, these questions helped interviewers identify candidate biases like homophobia or racism. Other companies have encouraged hiring managers to think less about cultural "fit" and more about cultural "add" to change the mindset around the value of diverse perspectives.

Diversifying interview panels. Employees with different backgrounds will pay attention to different applicant characteristics, and may even put diverse interviewees at ease. Like with other practices, though, this one should be implemented with care—repeatedly calling on the same diverse talent to conduct interviews increases the chances of burnout.

Maintaining scorecards. Some companies created scorecards that required interviewers to rate applicants on desired attributes. These were not used to gamify the hiring process or simply hire applicants with the highest score. Rather, they were used as a supplement to structured interviews and gave interviewers a focused way to discuss and meaningfully compare interviewees.

Evaluate who needs to make the hiring decision. Some hiring decisions require buy-in from an entire team. Other hiring decisions only need approval from a hiring manager. One working group participant noted that their company used to require unanimous team agreement for new hires. Realizing that one biased team member is all it takes for this approach to fail, they began designating one employee to make the final hiring decision, with others offering input when required.