

Understanding interviewer bias & how to eliminate it

Close your eyes and imagine a comfortable pair of shoes. What do you see? Running shoes? Flip flops? Dress shoes? If you had to buy comfy shoes right now, your shopping choices would mirror those preferences, sending you to wherever you thought they sold comfy shoes as you envision them. This is a great example of personal bias. It's also a great example of how that bias can impact a hiring decision.

I've never worn Crocs, and while some people say they're amazing, I'll probably go my entire life without buying a pair. Crocs could be the most scientifically comfortable shoes in the world, and I'd miss out on them because I ignorantly stick with different shoes. Bias is what tells us not to fix what isn't broken. Bias is what makes the search for better alternatives feel unimportant.

Hiring suffers from similar issues. There's a wealth of research showing how personal bias constantly gets between the right person and the job offer they deserve. However, many hiring managers just don't care. They mistake their own biases for "intuition" or "common sense" without ever checking how they got those preconceived notions in the first place. As we'll see later, they pay a price for it by missing out on potential superstar employees.

Eliminating bias from the recruitment process is crucial for finding better employees and driving productivity. It also increases your self-awareness as an interviewer.

Bias isn't all bad

As any toddler can tell you, touching a hot stove hurts. After an injury like that, it's natural to avoid getting too close. Does that mean people should fear and steer clear of stoves for the rest of their lives? Of course not. People use stoves all the time without incident, not because they get used to burning their hands, but because learning to work with high heat is essential to cooking. You can still get burned by a hot stove, but learning safety is worth the benefits.

Unconscious bias originates from this same kind of caution—a knee-jerk reaction from a past experience that aims to keep life on an even keel. Except unlike a stove, far fewer people move on from their biases. They usually don't even recognize them, and some are even defensive of their behaviors. Some interviewers cling to biases of old-fashioned decorum and politeness, and they assume that people who don't are simply being rude.

While you can't control *how* you feel, checking your personal bias as it plays into a hiring decision can stop you from rejecting perfectly good job candidates. Even better, though, is to eliminate those biases.

Knowledge is power

A big part of your job as an interviewer is to identify your own biases—not to judge whether they are good or bad, but to acknowledge how they affect you. The more you know, the easier it is to accept the actions of others as simply different instead of wrong.

Biases come in all shapes and sizes, and some are more obvious than others. Racism and stereotyping are common biases most of us know about. [Studies like this](#) show how racial bias affects hiring decisions by judging identical resumes based on the applicant's name. It compares applications with names that sound more traditionally white or black. Researchers found that phone screening yielded significantly higher callback rates for white-named applicants. Even [recruiting software](#) lets stereotyping bias inform algorithms about what makes an employee "successful" at a company. Bias is all around us, embedded into the very systems we use to pick the best candidates.

Companies with diverse labor forces outperform those with narrow employee bases, both in output and [investor returns](#). In some cases, diverse companies were valued at up to 35 percent higher than companies where diversity wasn't emphasized. This means that interviewing candidates with a broad spectrum of backgrounds is crucial to the success of your company.

If you're surprised, you're not alone. It wasn't until the early 90s that researchers uncovered the connection between a diverse workforce and higher performance, and companies didn't exactly jump at the opportunity to make changes. In [as late as 2013](#), Pinterest disclosed that only 12 percent of its engineers were women. So while we hear a lot about workforce diversity today, it's only about a decade old as far as best practices go.

Types of interviewer bias we know about

Sexism, racism, and other infractions as outlined by the EEOC are easy enough to watch out for—choose candidates by how well they can do the job, not by their ethnicity, gender, or what they believe. Most hiring managers know the laws about discrimination, and many even use quotas to promote diversity among job candidates. This is good, but we still have a long way to go.

The harder biases to detect are the ones you don't hear about in the news or in corporate trainings: peer pressure, using a handshake or other mannerism to gauge character, judging based on attire—biases based on arbitrary clues. And yet, they can and do have negative impacts on the outcomes of otherwise qualified applicants. They just don't get talked about as much.

Looking the part

Dress for the job you want. It's a phrase people say often, encouraging interviewees to arrive looking sharp in hopes of setting themselves apart. While this is harmless advice for applicants, hiring managers can easily mistake a clean-cut appearance for job readiness. This first impression bias ignores how many *unqualified* applicants show up dressed to the nines, while many *qualified* applicants simply don't share your standards of grooming. Judging a candidate by how they dress can be misleading. Mark Zuckerberg famously obtained financing for Facebook wearing jeans and a hoodie, so don't let your interview process be unfairly influenced by things that have nothing to do with the job.

How applicants dress isn't the only appearance-based bias, either. Your company may have a culture that causes a certain look to appear around the office. If an applicant walks into the interview matching that look, you may assume they're a good fit and feel inclined to give them the job. Likewise, if the candidate's appearance goes against the usual look around the office—such as, say, wearing a hijab for religious reasons—you may lean toward rejecting them for the job. This is called affinity bias, and it has led to the rejection of many great job candidates.

Some people just don't dress like you (some, like this writer, have no sense of fashion at all). What feels like business casual to them might be street clothes to someone else. Unless the job is customer-facing, your candidate's looks are not a reliable predictor of their ability to do good work.



Doing bad detective work

Thanks to social media like Facebook and LinkedIn, employers have more access to candidates' personal information than ever before. There's virtually no risk or accountability for doing a little Facebook stalking and digging around to see if someone is the right fit, which presents a huge opportunity for confirmation bias to influence hiring decisions.

Online presence is a poor reflection of one's actual personality. Users can curate an impression of whoever they want to be. [Instagram was reported](#) to wreak havoc on its users' mental health, and the reason why is obvious: by filtering out the normal or bad parts of one's life, online personas offer unrealistic standards of happiness and well-being. In short, social media isn't reliable.

When people post on social media, they're usually proud or amused by something. They post far less about shortcomings and frustrations, leading the unwary onlooker to assume they don't have any. Interviewers who judge candidates by the single characteristic of their online persona allow their own biases to run wild. It's kind of like those emails your grandma receives from a Nigerian prince asking for money—just because the picture looks nice doesn't mean the person is.

A good rule of thumb is to avoid social media throughout the decision-making process. If you have a burning desire to check their profile, limit it to LinkedIn and try to save it for after the conditional job offer is extended.

Follow through with your process

Hiring a new employee is exciting. You have the enviable position of extending an opportunity that puts a smile on their face, with all the optimism that comes from making an impact in the company. Sometimes though, candidates who do well in the job interview just don't have the competencies needed to make the cut.

Tough hiring decisions like these are normal. You're used to making them. Sometimes, though, you aren't the one making those decisions. Sometimes, you're not the last person to have a say.

Conformity bias is when your boss or another higher-up wants things a certain way, and you don't agree.

Naturally, it's easier to go with the flow and avoid rocking the boat, even if the data shows you to be in the right. For some, having a tough conversation about a candidate's readiness may even feel pessimistic or negative.

Trust your process. Make sure you have a rubric to go along with your set of questions to show decision makers how you arrived at your hiring choice, and be willing to have a conversation about it. This is one of the hardest biases to overcome, since it feels more like insubordination than good sense. With structured interviews, you can feel confident in your decisions, even when someone else wants a different outcome.

The horn effect & the halo effect

Nothing screams "worthy candidate" like a laundry list of career accomplishments. A candidate can spruce up their resume to make your wildest dreams come true, to the point that if/when they turn out to be false, you've already decided to make it work for them. Interviewers have been duped into thinking a candidate's bull run of \$5 million growth at their last company had something to do with their employment there. It happens all the time. Candidates know the language of interview questions, and some masterfully toe the line between selling themselves and baselessly bragging.

This isn't to say doubt your interviewees—that would make for an awkward conversation—but make sure to ask follow-up questions that solicit how their contributions led to the outcomes they're sharing. Give them a chance to talk more about themselves. Ask for details. Be excited. It's good that they want to share this experience, but you still need to verify that what they say has something to do with what they did.

How recording helps

Nothing hides from the camera. In the age of Zoom calls, recording an interview has never been easier, so take advantage of the chance to observe how you act in this setting. It's near impossible not to catch something new each time you watch, cringe-worthy as it may be. You may realize you misinterpreted something or misjudged an answer at first glance. Maybe your body language is overly aggressive. You may even see assumptions you make without realizing them. All of these are excellent steps toward becoming a better interviewer.

Eliminating bias from your interviews starts with an honest examination of yourself. The more you can step back and look at what your less conscious thoughts, the better your process will go. Good luck!