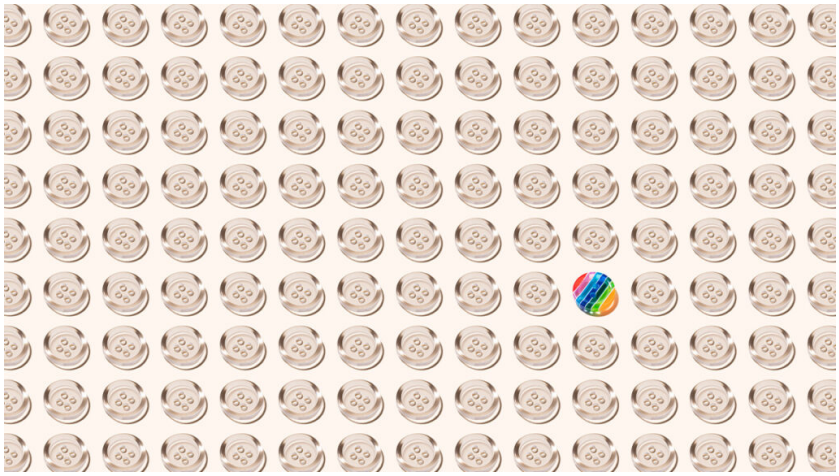
Diversity And Inclusion

6 Behavioral Nudges to Reduce Bias in Hiring and Promotions

by Paola Cecchi-Dimeglio

November 02, 2022



MirageC/Getty Images

Summary. In today's talent marketplace, everybody is looking for new ways to make the best hiring and promotion decisions. In this article, building on decision intelligence and evidence-based solutions that drive scalable change, the author lays out six behavioral nudges that can help companies develop practices that reduce bias, boost diversity, and create the best possible

Everyone who has worked to get diversity right knows there is no elixir that increases diverse talent in leadership roles. Doing DEI by the numbers just won't get you there. But here's some good news: By focusing on decision intelligence, and on evidence-based solutions that drive scalable change and increase inclusion, leaders *can* increase the number of diverse candidates that they hire and promote.

As an academic, I've long studied the problem of increasing employee diversity in companies, and as a consultant I've applied what I've learned to help companies hire and promote more fairly. Through this work, I've identified six behavioral nudges that together form an

effective, well-rounded approach — one that can help executives make better, less-biased decisions in hiring and promotion.

1) Generate ranked criteria for candidates.

Recruitment can be overwhelming for both interviewers and candidates. When overwhelmed, people tend to favor the familiar. But a strategic approach can help bring order to the process. According to decision research, having a solid list of pre-determined, prioritized qualifications for a position is key to choosing wisely. The hiring committee should agree on five to 10 qualifications, which may span both technical skills and business acumen, and rank them by importance.

During interviews, the goal is for each qualification and candidate to stand on its own, to shield any assessment from prior influences. After the interview, the interviewer can assign a high, medium, or low rating. For example, in hiring for a communications manager, writing and collaboration might be ranked as the two top skills necessary, while web design might be ranked as fifth or sixth. Then, when assessing the group of candidates, those who scored high on more important factors would end up ranked higher than those who scored high on lesser prioritized qualifications, thus surfacing those candidates who exhibited the most important skills for the job. This practice forces assessors to focus separately on each area and score it individually, as opposed to, say, judging the interview to be a total success based on one or two positive elements that may or may not be core to the job.

Creating clear, succinct lists of qualifications provides a set of focal points that can steer decision-makers away from race, gender, and socioeconomic background. This strategy should generate diverse sets of options and can be used with a broad range of position types.

2) Challenge yourself to support the opposite opinion.

First interviewed, first hired. That's a pattern I've noticed in my work, and I'm not the only one: Research reveals a tendency to favor early options and undervalue contradictory evidence that comes later. In other words, if you've made an initial judgment, you are more likely to ignore or discount new data that doesn't support it.

An HR professional at a global professional services firm I worked with noticed that 89% of new hires were the first candidates seen. The committee wanted to counter this biasing tendency, so decision-makers applied a "thinking of the opposite" strategy. For each candidate who had been favored, the decision-makers were challenged to think of reasons why these top candidates might be the *wrong* choice. Similarly, for the candidates not ranked highly, decision-makers were challenged to develop an argument for why they might be the *right* fit. When challenged to create the necessary counterarguments, decision-makers may go back and refer to data that they initially discounted, ultimately making their decisions more informed and objective.

3) Modify the environment.

Different environments can improve or support high-quality decision-making and can impact organizations' hiring efforts. Seemingly small factors such as time slots, room arrangements, and a room's temperature can all exert influence on the decision-making process.

We can all be choice architects. Choice architecture refers to the way alternatives are presented to decision-makers. For example, one design choice is timing: If you ask someone to rate a candidate before lunch, when they're hungry, their ratings are likely to be harsher. However, if you ask them to do it at a time of day when people tend to have more brainpower and are more relaxed — for example, in the morning — their ratings are likely to be more favorable.

Shifting interview times is one way to use psychological principles to influence behavior for good, so create blocks of time in your calendar when you predict you will be feeling more relaxed and energetic, and allocate that time to rate candidates. To be even more confident in your decision, make an initial decision early in the week, revisit it toward the end of the week. At that point, ask yourself: Has your thinking evolved, or do you still feel the same way about the decision?

4) Invert the default rules.

Default rules may support or improve individual and social welfare. However, these unquestioned shortcuts often lock in bias. When attempting to increase the number of women or minorities hired into leadership roles, defaults can get in the way.

One midsize technology company that I worked with was stunned to learn that this was happening to them. When we assessed their promotion patterns, they expected to find patterns favorable to women and minorities, but we found the opposite. The company was routinely promoting the same groups.

To shake up promotion decisions, the company inverted the default. Instead of making promotion the exception, it became the rule. Unless there was a convincing argument for why an employee should be excluded, everyone was promoted — that is, they were given added responsibilities. In addition, when decision-makers were making a case for exclusion, they were given a photograph of each candidate and had to use their names when discussing why that individual should *not* be promoted. This approach led to a more detailed and robust discussion of candidates' efforts and achievements.

Another variation of this approach would be in hiring. Imagine you have six slots to fill and 30 candidates. Each candidate is categorized as either safe, neutral, or risky. To create a more diverse cohort, take two candidates from each group. This is much like the logic behind creating a diverse stock portfolio — in different times and cycles, different

characteristics shine. Creating a cohort model can help employees help each other and can boost collaboration. Making decisions in this way can increase diversity, because assessors will deliberately take risks on people whom they might normally exclude.

5) Use planning prompts.

If you don't articulate concrete action plans, forgetfulness or procrastination can derail your follow through. To help decision-makers avoid these pitfalls, planning prompts have been used successfully to increase important outcomes, including exercise, flu shots, and hitting deadlines. When an individual is prompted to decide about the when, where, and how of intended actions, the plan represents a commitment that is both memorable and psychologically difficult to break.

Consider the case of a southwestern engineering consultancy that was struggling to hire more women and ethnic minorities until HR recognized a pattern. The applications of women and minority candidates were often missing required documents. Interviewers tasked with reaching out to candidates to request the information were not following through. The consultancy implemented a digital checklist, listing staff and their follow-up tasks.

These lists could be seen by all assessors. Tasks featured the candidate's name and image, the follow-up action, and the responsible employee. Lists were distributed one week before the interview, and responsible parties signed off on their tasks. IT configured the lists to send individual reminders that were copied to all the other staff who interviewed that candidate, HR, and the executive to whom the candidate would report. Everyone could see who had followed up and who had not. This system led to 100% follow through and increased the number of women and minorities hired at the consultancy.

6) Shape information effectively.

The right information isn't always enough. It has to arrive in a compelling format. To guide decisions and motivate people, communicators can frame some messages as gains and others as losses. Prospect theory looks at the subtle ways in which framing influences decision-making. For example, in health-related communication, loss-framed messages can work better as a call to action than gain-framed messages, especially when the specific issue is seen as very relevant. A loss-framed message such as "Without regular screenings, you increase the chance of dying from cancer" has been found to be more effective than a gain-framed message such as, "Regular screening increases your chances of surviving cancer."

Here's how a global pharmaceutical business used message framing when it wanted to help applicants prepare for interviews: The firm paired each applicant with an employee through an opt-in system, and, in its messaging the company emphasized the potential gains in a list of 15 benefits. Among them were getting important inside information,

connecting with someone similar to themselves already working at the company, touring the corporate campus, and engaging in multiple practice interviews. Disappointingly, these gains motivated fewer than 14% of applicants to opt in. So the company changed course and began using the header “7 Interview Disasters You Want to Avoid.” Opt-in jumped to 72% and was higher among women and minorities.

A persuasive message is only as good as its likelihood to trigger action. Reframing the message enables a broader range of recipients to respond. With an increase of applicants opting in, the pharma company built a stream of better prepared candidates.

Conclusion

In today’s talent marketplace, everybody is looking for new ways to make the best hiring and promotion decisions. The adaptable interventions I’ve laid out in this article build on proven best practices that foster good decision intelligence. As a leader you need to pay better attention to what you’re getting, examine the data to determine why you’re getting it, and make interventions that change the default thinking. Only then will you be able to hire, develop, and keep the talent you need.

The Latest
Most Popular
All Topics
Magazine Archive
The Big Idea
Reading Lists
Case Selections
Video
Podcasts
Webinars
Data & Visuals
My Library
Newsletters
HBR Press
HBR Ascend

Article Reprints
Books
Cases
Collections
Magazine Issues
HBR Guide Series
HBR 20-Minute Managers
HBR Emotional Intelligence Series
HBR Must Reads
Tools

Contact Us
Advertise with Us
Information for Booksellers/Retailers
Masthead
Global Editions
Media Inquiries
Guidelines for Authors
HBR Analytic Services
Copyright Permissions

Manage My Account

My Library
Topic Feeds
Orders
Account Settings
Email Preferences
Account FAQ
Help Center
Contact Customer Service

Follow HBR

Facebook
Twitter
LinkedIn
Instagram
Your Newsreader

Harvard Business Publishing

About Us | Careers | Privacy Policy | Cookie Policy | Copyright Information | Trademark Policy

Harvard Business Publishing: Higher Education | Corporate Learning | Harvard Business Review | Harvard Business School