

Common Hiring Biases



INTERVIEW TRAINING

AUTOMATIC THINKING

On average we make 35,000 decisions each day. Although these differ in difficulty and importance — from deciding to take the stairs or the elevator or the strategy behind an important client engagement, we're hit with them daily. If we had to consciously process all of these decisions our brains would crash. So how do we do it?

Psychologist and economist, Daniel Kahneman, posits our brains have two operating systems to process information and balance our cognitive load.

System 1 (Fast Thinking)

- Operates automatically and unconsciously
- Used for everyday decisions (driving, interpreting facial expressions, walking)
- Uses mental shortcuts and heuristics
- Prone to error
- 98% of our thinking

System 2 (Slow Thinking)

- Requires slow deliberate and controlled mental processes
- Used to reason, analyze, and solve problems
- Confirms and corrects judgment of system 1 but takes time, effort, and concentration
- Slow but reliable
- 2% of our thinking

Both systems are necessary for functioning and decision-making. Our automatic System 1 lightens the load of our deliberate System 2, by going on autopilot and saving our mental energy. It relies on heuristics, or mental shortcuts, derived from our previous experiences. **However, what's important is that Kahneman found that the two systems of thinking arrive at different results given the same inputs.**

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

While System 1 thinking is helpful in many situations, it can lead to unconscious cognitive biases and errors of judgment when making important decisions — like who to hire — which require the slow, deliberate, and methodical thinking of System 2.

Unconscious biases are mental shortcuts that influence our perceptions of right vs. wrong, safe vs. unsafe, and good vs. bad. Each of us has uniquely subjective unconscious biases shaped by how we were raised, our social groups, previous jobs, team norms, media exposure, and more that ultimately influence the way we perceive reality.

In an ideal world, the decision to hire a candidate would be based solely on their ability to perform the job well. The hiring process would be approached in an objective, pragmatic way, free from subjectivity and unconscious bias (System 2). But in the reality of our busy, information-driven lives, it's easy to overlook relevant information and rely on System 1 to classify and categorize people.

Whether we've been interviewing for 10 days or 10 years, we have the responsibility to slow down, become conscious of our biases, and actively work to eliminate them from the hiring process.



COMMON INTERVIEW BIASES

Halo/Horn Effect

Instead of comprehensively investigating a candidate's background, focusing too heavily on one positive (halo) or negative (horn) aspect of a candidate — allowing it to overshadow other behaviors, actions, or attributes. Globalizing one positive or negative characteristic can result in artificially positive or negative evaluations regardless of actual skills and abilities.

Halo:

We place high expectations on a candidate and disregard red flags that clearly indicate they aren't right for the role

Tim has a degree from a prestigious university, so he must be highly competent. I don't need to ask these easy questions.

Horn:

We may disregard positive responses or characteristics because something negative irks us or grabs our attention and we can't move past it.

Terri answers the first question poorly leading us to believe they're not qualified. I begin to zone out for the remainder of the interview.

Contrast Effect

There's a tendency to compare resumes and candidates to the one that went before. In doing so, we're constantly moving our goalposts. Instead of judging whether a candidate is suitable for the role based on predetermined criteria, we compare them to other candidates.

Confirmation Bias

Also known as First Impression Error. This is when we make snap judgments based on our first impressions (positive or negative) that cloud the rest of the interview. If not careful, we may explicitly favor, search for, and remember information or traits that confirm our initial belief or hypothesis. As a result, we ignore or forget details that conflict with said belief.

Examples:

Kim's test project simply does not compare to Michelle's — which was the best test project we've ever seen. If Michelle did it, why couldn't Kim? (In reality, Michelle spent a total of 2 weeks on the project; whereas Kim spent 1 day)

One amazing (or terrible) test project or interview can set the new standard — either raising or lowering the bar.

Instead, we should be assessing candidates' test projects to the predetermined criteria and not each other.

Examples:

Amy was 5 minutes late. The interviewer seeks out information to support the idea that Amy is not reliable. During the interview Amy repeatedly looks at her watch feeling bad. But the interviewer notes she was distracted and flustered after being late.

Ron believes candidates with an online degree are less qualified than those with 4-year degrees. He looks for reasons to confirm his belief.

Nonverbal Bias

Undue emphasis placed on nonverbal cues that may be irrelevant to performance in the role. This could include evaluations based on body language, weight, mannerisms, the way someone speaks (loudness or softness of voice), attractiveness, etc.

Example:

His weak handshake made me think he lacks confidence and power. We really need someone who can lead the team and instill confidence.

Perhaps the candidate objectively had a weak handshake. The problem is when we leap from a weak handshake to conclusion about other competencies.

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Stereotyping

Forming an opinion of how a candidate will think, act, or respond based on generalizations.

Example:

She most recently worked within the government industry. I'm worried about her ability to be innovative and adjust to a lean, fast-paced environment.

A Yahoo email address is a red flag. Typically, candidates with these addresses don't keep up with technology.

Similar-to-Me / Affinity Bias

We have a tendency to favor people similar to us — similar in personality, style, interests, background, area of expertise, etc. We also feel a natural affinity towards others when we have something in common. Naturally, we like to connect, but be wary of placing undue emphasis on intangible factors.

Examples:

I know he lacks experience, but he reminded me so much of my younger self. I have a feeling that he's eager and will work hard.

So random, but we actually went to the same high school. I would love to work with her again. I really enjoyed reminiscing on the good ol' days.

Negative Emphasis

Involves the rejection of a candidate based on a small amount of negative information. Research indicates we weight unfavorable information 5x more than favorable information.

Example:

Rachel is clearly qualified for the role. She did great in the test project and hit all of the key points. I'm confident she could do the job, but I didn't love how she answered my follow-up question. I wish she would have talked about what she told me in a previous interview. Hm, maybe she's not as qualified as I thought.

Illusory Correlation

When we believe a relationship exists between two variables, when in fact there is not. Interviewers may over-index a question or ask questions that bear no relevance to their ability to perform well in the job. This may also occur when interviews try to globalize insights based on one data point. If they are good at A, then it must mean they're good at B and C.

Examples:

At lunch, the candidate salted their food without tasting it. This tells me that the candidate is not great at making evidence-based decisions.

I noticed a 5-month gap on her resume. This means they probably aren't employable

She was very funny. I know our clients would love her.

Conformity Bias

Our decision making can be affected by group peer pressure. Our fear of being thought poorly of by our peers or being ridiculed can allow us to be swayed by others.

Imagine if you're the only one who thinks a particular candidate did well. Would you say so and go against the rest of the interviewers or allow yourself to be swept along by the majority?

Intuition

When interviewers trust or simply use their gut to make decisions. This could result in basing decisions on irrelevant factors such as emotion or our past experiences rather than the candidate's actual capabilities. It's important to remember that while there can be patterns, each candidate is unique and deserves to be assessed without prior emotions involved.

How we combat this:

Conformity bias is one of the reasons we ask interviewers to not share their decisions with others before the retro; we don't want others' opinions to sway your own.

Further, we no longer do group retros where everyone discusses their feedback in real-time. Factors like seniority or power dynamics can influence decisions.

Examples:

He used to work at NASA. My former boss worked there, and he was a nightmare! I'd avoid hiring anyone from there.

I can't explain it, but my gut tells me she will likely leave if her partner gets a job out of state. I think it's too risky to hire her.

7 WAYS TO REDUCE INTERVIEW BIAS

Interview biases become particularly problematic when used in our decision making process. Specifically, when we leap to assumptions about candidates based on our biases — as opposed to exploring the candidate's background fully.

As interviewers, we have to actively ensure we're seeking out supporting evidence directly from candidates and questioning our biases to ensure a fair and objective hiring process.

1. Benchmark the Job

Establish a consistent and clear definition of the job's necessary skills, qualifications, and responsibilities. These predetermined criteria are found in the **Greenhouse Interview Kit** — accessed through the calendar invite.

- Review the scorecard + job description (in the Interview Kit) **prior** to your interview.
- Assess the **highlighted** criteria in your scorecard
- Use the scorecard to guide your final decision
- As a reminder, each interview stage was designed to assess specific criteria — thus the criteria you assess in your interview will differ from the criteria another interviewer is tasked to assess

2. Use Structured Interviews

Studies show unstructured interviews are the worst predictors of on-the-job performance. When interviewers ask different questions to different candidates, the interview can quickly veer from the predetermined criteria on the scorecard — and lead to skewed assessments. For example, if we question a candidate's ability to do the job based on our first impression, we may "grill" them with harder questions than someone who we felt confident about after our initial impression. If we immediately connect with the candidate, we may ask easier questions and spend more time doing small talk and selling the role — and less time assessing their competencies. Two candidates for the same role may have completely different interviews — thus skewing our assessments

- Instead, treat each candidate and interview the same
- Our goal is to reduce subjectivity and increase consistency.
- Ask the custom questions provided in the scorecard along with questions directly related to the competencies listed in the scorecard

3. Don't Rely on Memory

Our memories are hugely unreliable systems for decision making. Memories are interpretations of the past and not hard facts. They're influenced by *our* current knowledge, expectations, and cognitive biases. If we don't take notes, our recall will likely support whatever biases or misconceptions we started with.

- Always take detailed notes!
- Write down what the candidate *actually* said, and not your feelings or interpretations about what they said (e.g. Bad answer to ownership question)
- Jot down concrete examples

4. Behavioral-Based Interviewing

Behavioral-based interviews are based on the premise that the best predictor of future job performance (or behavior) is past job performance (or behavior). Behavioral-based interviews give you insights into a candidate's past. For example, "Describe a difficult problem at work that required you to come up with a creative solution." Behavioral-based questions give us concrete examples to explore a candidate's thought process and behaviors. It pushes us to go beyond our assumptions from their resume, for example.

- As interviewers, it's our responsibility to ask the right questions to elicit enough information to make a decision
- If you have concerns or question marks, use behavioral-based questions to get concrete examples
- If a candidate doesn't explicitly bring a particular skill up in conversation, it doesn't necessarily mean they're lacking in this skill. We have to guide the conversation at times.
- As difficult as it may be, try to suspend your judgments. Instead, test your conclusions by asking behavioral-based questions!

5. Ask Clarifying Questions

If in doubt, talk it out! If you have a strong instinct about a candidate (positive or negative), take the time to ask clarifying questions to explore further. Your scorecard should reflect concrete examples to support your decision. If your scorecard has phrases like, **"I felt..."** or **"I noticed..."** or **"I worry that..."** or **"Based on X...then Y..."** — then we encourage you to ask clarifying questions. Our goal is to leave the interview prepared to make an evidence-based decision.

- "Tell me about the steps you took and why."
- "You mentioned client presentations. Tell me what those entailed in your last role."
- Remember — when in doubt, talk it out!
- Your scorecard should clearly note the evidence to support your decisions.

6. Don't Discuss Your Scorecard

...until after the retro to prevent conformity bias! Your scorecard should reflect your decision solely based on your interview — and not others'. During the retro, the TA team member and the hiring manager will comprehensively review all scorecards to make a fair and balanced decision. We are looking for your evaluation of a handful of criteria covered during your interview. Many times, interviewers are not evaluating the same criteria — so it's normal if opinions differ! At the end of the day, we want a clear picture of who this candidate is with both strengths and areas for growth.

7. Examine Your Own Biases

Yes, you have them! I have them. All humans do! By becoming more aware of our hidden biases, we reduce the likelihood of making hiring decisions based solely on preconceived notions of candidates. Take a few moments to think about your biases around candidates. Think about your red flags along with the qualities you get excited about even before meeting a candidate.

Ask yourself:

- What do I like or dislike about this?
- What assumptions do I make about candidates?
- Are they supported by evidence?
- How do these relate to the scorecard criteria?
- What if I'm wrong? Have I met someone that's proved me wrong? (I certainly have!)

We may never completely rid ourselves of our unconscious biases, but we can work to minimize their negative impact in the hiring process. As a result, we'll create a more consistent and transparent hiring process and ensure we're bringing in the most qualified candidates into the organization.





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