Ensuring an Equitable Hiring Processes

A growing body of research has shown that when team members bring diverse backgrounds and perspectives to the table in an inclusive environment, they make better decisions and generate more revenue than homogenous competitors.[1] Diversity doesn't just happen, though. It takes ample and sustained commitment from leadership. We often see early-stage founders prioritize speed in the hiring process, assuming that they can tackle diversity at a later stage. Over time, though, as teams codify their values and establish norms, it becomes more and more difficult to attract and support heterogeneous candidates. "Your first 10 hires will perpetuate the company's values and are likely to hire 10 more people just like them," so building the team you want to see at scale is crucial.[2,3]

There are several ways to make your hiring process more equitable:[4]

- **Be wary of coded language:**[5] Job descriptions are a marketing tool. If you want to build a more diverse team, consider removing gendered language, jargon, and idioms that can make potential candidates feel excluded. There are free tools online, such as Totaljobs and the Gender Decoder, that can help you identify and replace language that introduces bias.

- **Limit the number of mandatory qualifications:** Experts recommend listing only the qualifications that are absolutely vital as mandatory, as women are less likely to apply for roles where they don't meet 100% the qualifications. A laundry list of "nice-to-haves" can inadvertently discourage some candidates from applying.

- **Use a blind resume review:**[6] Studies have found that applicants with non-white sounding names are several times less likely to be called for an interview than applicants with white-sounding names. Having candidates remove identifiable information from their applications can be a simple and effective way to mitigate unconscious bias in the selection process.

- **Standardize the process**: Asking each candidate the same set of questions can minimize bias by leveling the playing field and helping the interviewer remain focused on the factors that will impact job performance. Interviewers can also use a pre-determined rubric to reduce reliance on likeability and ensure that the criterion remain the same, regardless of a candidate's background.

- **Mimic job-related tasks**: The best indicators of future performance are skills tests that mirror the tasks a new hire would be asked to perform on the job. These provide hiring managers with the opportunity to compare potential team members based on the quality of their work.

While these tactics can help mitigate bias in the selection process, it takes more than hiring diverse candidates to build a diverse team. It's crucial to create an inclusive culture that supports people from all backgrounds, ensures that all voices are heard, and enables team members to do their best work.

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[1] Delivering through diversity (McKinsey & Co., 2018)
[2] How to Make Diversity a Hiring Priority at the Startup Stage (Builtin, 2020)
[3] Welcome to the diversity debt crisis (Wired, 2017)
[4] 7 Practical ways to Reduce Bias in Your Hiring Process (Harvard Business School, 2017)
[5] Simple ways to take gender bias out of your job ads (Harvard Business School, 2016)
[6] Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2003)