

RESEARCH GUIDE

This research guide is a compilation of academic articles, research papers, and online posts that discuss the importance and need for managing and reducing the affects of bias during the recruiting process.

The following pages include questions, comments, and explanations of different types of bias and solutions with their corresponding footnotes.

The following pages may also include hyperlinks to, the above-mentioned, articles and papers as long as those resources remain available.

Reducing Recruitment Bias

What do you mean when you say some terms are “inclusive” and some are “problematic”?

- The Twitter-sphere generated a host of anecdotal evidence on the effect of job description language on underrepresented applicants when a Tweeter posted the question “If you’re a woman or minority in your field, what language turns you away from job descriptions?” From “rockstar” to “work hard play hard,” hundreds provided examples of off-putting language.
- In 2011, Aaron Kay from Duke University and Danielle Gaucher and Justin Friesen from University of Waterloo released a [seminal study demonstrating that subtle wording differences in job descriptions can significantly affect who applies for a given job](#). The researchers found that minimizing masculine-themed language results in greater interest among potential female applicants. ¹
- Consider the differences between these two variations of a sentence used for the same registered nurse job opening:
- **Masculinely worded**
 - “We are determined to deliver superior medical treatment tailored to each individual patient.”
- **Inclusively worded**
 - “We are committed to providing quality health care that is sympathetic to the needs of our patients.”
- The results showed that descriptions with more inclusive wording were more appealing and would result in more female applicants than descriptions with more masculine wording.
- We know that individuals considering applying for a job are looking as much for clues about a company’s environment as they are at the role itself when they read a company’s job description. For example, an applicant reading a job description boasting a company’s “beer Thursdays” or foosball competitions may assume a company is most friendly to people from a certain type of background (e.g. young, no parenting responsibilities, male). Use TalVista’s wording tips to create a job description that better conveys to your potential applicants: “We are a company that values contributions from all kinds of people.”
- To expand on the list of terms in the original research, TalVista has surveyed thousands of participants on the impact of the most commonly used terms in job descriptions on the web today. Further, **we have expanded the research to not only focus on “masculine” and “feminine” differences, but also look at the impact of subtle wording differences on underrepresented minorities.** We help you look out for these words by labeling terms “inclusive” and “problematic.”
- Keep in mind that when researchers looked at the effect of job descriptions with a high proportion of “inclusive” words, men’s interest in applying for those jobs was unchanged. In other words, it’s likely that you can’t add too many inclusive terms. Also, you don’t need to get rid of all uses of problematic terms, just add inclusive terms to counterbalance them so that you achieve an overall balance of inclusive and problematic language. Gaucher, Danielle, Justin Friesen, and Aaron C. Kay. “Evidence that gendered wording in job advertisements exists and sustains gender inequality.” Journal of personality and social psychology 101.1 (2011): 109.

¹ Gaucher, Danielle, Justin Friesen, and Aaron C. Kay. “Evidence that gendered wording in job advertisements exists and sustains gender inequality.” Journal of personality and social psychology 101.1 (2011): 109.

How does TalVista calculate the job score?

- The algorithm calculating your job's effectiveness score adds points for content that will attract a broader pool of applicants and subtracts points for content likely to alienate some applicants.
- Your job descriptions earn positive points by using inclusive language and [other best practice strategies for attracting more female and minority applicants](#). TalVista subtracts points for [problematic language](#), qualifications that include a [specific number of years](#) of experience and including too many requirements.

Why shouldn't I include "years of experience" or more than three requirements?

- There is a large body of literature on gender differences in confidence that suggest men are likely to apply to a job if they meet some of the requirements you've listed, while women are likely to review the required and preferred list and then only apply if they meet all of them. This difference may be linked to an observed trend that [men tend to overestimate their abilities, while women tend to underestimate them](#).²
- Make your content meaningful. It is critical that your job description include [only criteria that is truly important to job performance](#) because every line you include wields a huge impact on the diversity of the individuals choosing to apply for that job.
- Imagine Mary in this real-life example. She reads your job description requirement for "3-5 years experience working in a service provider environment." Only having two and a half years of experience and interpreting your requirement literally, she hesitates to apply. Now Paul, also with just two and a half years of experience, applies for that job. Consider the possibility that Mary, who didn't apply, had a better overall resume than Paul, who you are now interviewing—all because of a narrowing choice made at the job description stage. Reuben, Ernesto, Paola Sapienza, and Luigi Zingales. "How stereotypes impair women's careers in science." Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 111.12 (2014): 4403-4408.

² Reuben, Ernesto, Paola Sapienza, and Luigi Zingales. "How stereotypes impair women's careers in science." Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 111.12 (2014): 4403-4408. .

Why does TalVista ask me to score the resume before I've seen the candidate's name?

- Howard versus Heidi, Greg versus Jamal—researchers have [replicated](#) countless times that the inferred [race](#) or gender (or parenthood, [immigration](#), [religious](#) or [socioeconomic](#) status) of an applicant impacts the way we rate their qualifications.³ For example, when researchers showed study participants completely identical resumes except one fact—one has the name Heidi, and one has Howard—Howard gets higher ratings. We see the same effect when comparing a white-sounding name with a black-sounding name: Greg gets more call backs than Jamal. By scoring a resume before getting identity information, TalVista helps users ensure an added measure of objectivity.

³ Bertrand, Marianne, and Sendhil Mullainathan. "Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A field experiment on labor market discrimination." *American economic review* 94.4 (2004): 991-1013.

Gaddis, S. Michael. "Discrimination in the credential society: an audit study of race and college selectivity in the labor market." *Social Forces* 93.4 (2014): 1451-1479.

Oreopoulos, Philip, and Diane Dechief. "Why do some employers prefer to interview Matthew, but not Samir? New Evidence from Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver." (2012).

Acquisti, Alessandro, and Christina M. Fong. "An experiment in hiring discrimination via online social networks." (2015).

Rivera, Lauren A., and András Tilcsik. "Class advantage, commitment penalty: The gendered effect of social class signals in an elite labor market." *American Sociological Review* 81.6 (2016): 1097-1131.

Why do I need to establish which resume criteria is most important before I start reviewing resumes?

- A study by Yale University psychologists unraveled the subtleties of job discrimination that happens as a result of stereotyping. The study showed that even when we think we're choosing a candidate for totally objective reasons like education or experience, a gut-level bias about who would traditionally fill a job often influences who we select.
- [In the experiment](#), participants reviewed resumes that presented a male and female candidate for police chief. The resumes were actually identical, with two manipulated variables: whether the resume belonged to "Michael" or "Michelle," and whether the candidate had more formal education or more experience. Michael's ratings consistently came out on top in each experiment. When his was the resume without college education but more experience, participants said they picked him for "having more street smarts." And they still picked Michael when Michelle had more experience and Michael had gone to college, saying that Michelle wasn't a good candidate due to lack of education.
- The good news is that the study also showed how to mitigate our unconscious bias. Asking reviewers to establish criteria importance beforehand eliminated the shifting merits effect.⁴ With TalVista, resume reviewers are asked to "pre-commit" to which qualities are most important for job performance, helping eliminate the possibility that you will be swayed by other content in a particular candidate's resume, such as their

⁴ Uhlmann, Eric Luis, and Geoffrey L. Cohen. "Constructed criteria: Redefining merit to justify discrimination." *Psychological Science* 16.6 (2005): 474-480.

What kinds of biases happen during interviews?

- Of the various ways we select new talent, interviews can be particularly bias-laden and susceptible to snap judgments that get in the way of selecting the best person for the job. Common forms of bias likely to show up during an interview include “affective heuristic” and “confirmation bias.”
- **Affective Heuristic** describes our tendency to evaluate someone based on initial cues like appearance, body language, or attitude and use those superficial criteria to make a conclusion about a person’s character or potential job fit. Psychologists and sociologists have consistently shown our tendency to [select individuals who are like ourselves](#)—we connect more easily with people with whom we share an alma mater or neighborhood, and in turn may misinterpret those clues for how someone will perform in a job.⁵
- **Confirmation Bias** is when we take those snap-judgments and then [spend the interview seeking out information that supports](#) those conclusions.⁶
- Help yourself side-step interview bias by asking all your interviewees the same questions in the same order. Don’t skip any questions, and never cut an interview short. You can also keep at the forefront of your mind the criteria specified as most important for job performance when the requisition was opened – this criteria is reinforced when you score the interviewee on skills and values.

⁵ Greenwald, Anthony G., and Thomas F. Pettigrew. "With malice toward none and charity for some: Ingroup favoritism enables discrimination." *American Psychologist* 69.7 (2014): 669.

⁶ Dougherty, Thomas W., Daniel B. Turban, and John C. Callender. "Confirming first impressions in the employment interview: A field study of interviewer behavior." *Journal of applied psychology* 79.5 (1994): 659.

Why do I get a template of questions and scoring to follow?

- An interview is an information-gathering session made up of verbal and nonverbal exchanges between you and the interviewee. Because it's hard to make a complete character and skill assessment of a stranger in just one hour, our brains rely more on those non-verbal, gut-level cues and feelings to determine whether we want to work with a person or not. Because of these tendencies, interviews risk becoming more of a reflection of who you are than whether the candidate is qualified for the position. If we're really connecting with someone, we may ask easy interview questions the candidate can skate through and when we're not getting a good connection with someone, we may ask curveball interview questions to subconsciously prove they wouldn't do well in the job.⁷
- **The proven antidote is structured interviewing.** Structure is critical to an effective, unbiased interview. Decades of research concludes that structured interviews are [twice as effective](#) in predicting job success than unstructured interviews and help [mitigate bias](#).⁸ Structured interviews and pre-assigned templates help us get less distracted by extraneous cues and instead surface the most important information needed to evaluate a candidate.
- Here are the three key strategies of structured interviews:
 1. Revisit the most important job-related hiring criteria immediately before or as you work through the interview.
 2. Ask the same questions of everyone you interview, in the same order.
 3. Rate everyone on the same criteria using a standardized evaluation form.

⁷ Dipboye, Robert L. "Structured and unstructured selection interviews: Beyond the job-fit model." *Research in personnel and human resources management* 12 (1994): 79-123.

⁸ Ryan, Ann Marie, and Nancy T. Tippins. "Attracting and selecting: What psychological research tells us." *Human Resource Management* 43.4 (2004): 305-318.

Bragger, Jennifer DeNicolis, et al. "The effects of the structured interview on reducing biases against pregnant job applicants." *Sex Roles* 46.7-8 (2002): 215-226.

Brecher, Ellyn, Jennifer Bragger, and Eugene Kutcher. "The structured interview: Reducing biases toward job applicants with physical disabilities."

Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal 18.3 (2006): 155-170.

Why should I write notes and observations during the interview?

Recording your notes during the course of the interview has three key benefits:

- You are more likely to apply the [same structure of evaluation to each candidate, which increases accuracy and reduces bias](#).⁹
- If you complete a feedback form during or immediately following an interview, there's less risk that your busy schedule will keep you from completing that feedback form.
- The longer we wait to provide feedback, the more likely we are to fall back on cognitive shortcuts and past patterns (i.e. unconscious bias). Bauer, Cara C., and Boris B. Baltes. "Reducing the effects of gender stereotypes on performance evaluations." *Sex Roles* 47.9-10 (2002): 465-476.
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⁹ Bauer, Cara C., and Boris B. Baltes. "Reducing the effects of gender stereotypes on performance evaluations." *Sex Roles* 47.9-10 (2002): 465-476.

What's the problem with vetoing someone based on culture fit?

- When Glassdoor [collected interview questions in 2012](#), among the most common were “What’s your favorite movie?” and “What is your favorite website?” Interviewing for culture fit [is on the rise](#), despite [a stream of research](#) indicating that the highest performing teams are more different than they are similar.
- As Lauren A. Rivera, Assistant Professor of Management and Sociology at Northwestern University, summarizes in her [study on the trend in hiring for culture fit](#):¹⁰

“My findings demonstrate that—in many respects—employers hire in a manner more closely resembling the choice of friends or romantic partners than how one might expect employers to select new workers. When you look at the decision to date or marry someone what you think about is commonalities. Do you have a similar level of education? Did you go to a similar caliber school? Do you enjoy similar activities? Are you excited to talk to each other? Do you feel the spark? ... As a result, employers don't necessarily hire the most skilled candidates.”

- Beware of the “reminds me of me” effect. We know that you like you, but do you want to work on a team of individuals with only your strengths set? The best version of your team will draw on a diverse set of technical and personal skills; focus your attention less on commonalities and more on the criteria set established as most important for job performance.

¹⁰ Rivera, Lauren A. "Hiring as cultural matching: The case of elite professional service firms." American Sociological Review 77.6 (2012): 999-1022.

My company doesn't have gender or racial bias issues because we hire and promote based on merit.

- A fascinating study by researchers Emilio J. Castilla of MIT and Stephen Bernard of Indiana University showed that the more an organization explicitly presents itself as a meritocracy, the more likely managers are to act in a biased way, especially when it comes to pay gaps.¹¹ They coined the term “paradox of meritocracy” to describe the phenomenon in which managers in organizations that promote themselves as meritocratic show greater bias in favoring men over equally performing women for raises and bonuses.
- Further, emphasizing meritocracy can turn off minority candidates, especially when a company has low levels of visible minority representation. For example, a Yale-led study found that [advocating a “colorblind” policy, as opposed to explicitly valuing diversity, when minority representation in recruiting materials was low led black managers to experience heightened distrust and discomfort with an organization.](#)¹² (There was no effect of advocating a colorblind policy instead of highlighting diversity when minority representation was high).

¹¹ Castilla, Emilio J., and Stephen Benard. "The paradox of meritocracy in organizations." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 55.4 (2010): 543-676.

¹² Purdie-Vaughns, Valerie, et al. "Social identity contingencies: how diversity cues signal threat or safety for African Americans in mainstream institutions." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 94.4 (2008): 615.