Reducing the Potential for Bias

- Search committee chairs should discuss the potential for unintended bias during the initial meeting of the committee. It should be made clear that this mention is not a commentary on the particular search, but rather a recognition of processes that research suggests can influence decision making. Citations from selected articles may enhance the discussion.

- As the search enters certain key stages or decision points, it’s an opportunity for the chair to again mention the potential for implicit bias and offer specific examples. Committee members should be particularly vigilant during these key stages of the search process:
  - Publicity and advertising
  - Deciding where to look for outstanding “out of the box candidates”
  - Phone interviews with perspective candidates
  - Review of CVs
  - Face-to-face interviews
  - Job talks and group presentations
  - Developing a short list or final candidate(s)

- Having a broadly diverse committee can foster authentic dialogue regarding particular biases, but one should not look to a particular individual to initiate dialogue about the potential for bias. This is the responsibility of every member of the committee.

- Attempting to repress personal biases and stereotypes has been shown to not be effective in reducing unconscious bias; instead you might reflect on what 3-5 implicit biases you have, based on your upbringing and life experiences. Everyone has some implicit biases. Recognizing and acknowledging one’s own specific biases, when they appear to be operating, and then refuting and challenging them, can be helpful. Research suggests that this strategy can often inhibit the activation of stereotypes.

*Although the search committee chair has particular responsibility, all committee members bear responsibility and should be active participants in contributing to the reduction of implicit bias.

“Fortunately for serious minds, a bias recognized is a bias sterilized.”

— Benjamin Haydon, English Historical Painter and Writer.
Implicit Association — What It Is

Associations that affect our choices and decisions are the result of both conscious and unconscious mental processes. For example, research suggests when asked about associations between “overweight individuals” and the “capacity to be an effective employee,” most people might say that one’s weight is not related to job performance. They might go on to say that job performance is the result of skill level, personal motivation, as well as appropriate management and the organizational context. This explicit, conscious assessment might be very different than one’s implicit or unconscious view of “overweight individuals.”

A “test” of one’s unconscious attitudes about weight and competence might reveal a strong bias—a negative association between weight and work competence. It is this implicit association that has the potential for negatively impacting the search process. Recent research suggests that the influence of bias is reduced when people have a clearer recognition and understanding of the implicit association process, as well as an understanding of the potential for their own tendencies or preferences. It is recommended that search committees openly discuss the process and its potential for, in an unintended manner, including or excluding certain applicants.

The Implicit Association Test (IAT), available online at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html, is the most frequently used tool to “access” unconscious associations. It can reveal unconscious attitudes that are often at odds with conscious beliefs and statements. Professor Mahzarin Banaji, of Harvard University, and her colleagues have developed this online test and have authored numerous papers about the IAT and the potential implications of unconscious biases for decision making.

Resources


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