



# TEN EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR DE-BIASING THE WORKPLACE

Iris Bohnet, Siri Chilazi, and Anisha Asundi

Business, government and civil society want to benefit from 100% of the talent pool, but unconscious bias ingrained in minds and embedded in organizational practices and procedures can get in the way. These ten evidence-based practices can help organizations level the playing field by making all stages of the employee lifecycle less biased and more inclusive.

## TALENT MANAGEMENT

### 1 Anonymize Resumes.

Biases can be triggered unconsciously when we see a candidate's demographic information. This can lead us to select or promote candidates not based on a rational assessment of their capabilities but rather on stereotypes that are not useful in predicting future performance. One of the simplest ways to de-bias the hiring process is to evaluate resumes by removing candidates' demographic information.

#### Evidence:

Bertrand, M., & Mullainathan, S. (2004). [Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination](#). *The American Economic Review*, 94(4), 991-1013.

Goldin, C., & Rouse, C. (2000). [Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of "Blind" Auditions on Female Musicians](#). *The American Economic Review*, 90(4), 715-74

### 2 Use Work Sample Tests to Evaluate Candidates.

A work sample test that mimics the work candidates will actually do on the job (e.g. online writing or coding tests, customer service role play scenarios) is the most predictive instrument of future job performance, and less prone to unconscious biases that may come up during traditional hiring procedures like unstructured interviews or resume reviews. Aim to incorporate a work sample test component into the hiring process for as many roles as possible.

#### Evidence:

Schmidt, F. L., & Hunter, J. E. (1998). [The validity and utility of selection methods in personnel psychology: Practical and theoretical implications of 85 years of research findings](#). *Psychological Bulletin*, 124(2), 262-274.

3 **Implement Structured Interviews.**

Structured interviews minimize the effects of unconscious bias by focusing on job qualifications rather than subjective assessments of likeability or similarity and by enabling direct comparisons across candidates. Whenever interviewing candidates, ask everyone the same set of questions in the same order, and evaluate responses one by one, comparing across candidates according to pre-set criteria to calibrate your judgments.

**Evidence:**

Dana, J., Dawes, R., & Peterson, N. (2013). [Belief in the unstructured interview: The persistence of an illusion.](#) *Judgment and Decision Making*, 8(5), 512–520.

Levashina, J., Hartwell, C. J., Morgeson, F. P., & Campion, M.A. (2014). [The Structured Employment Interview: Narrative and Quantitative Review of the Research Literature.](#) *Personnel Psychology*, 67, 241-293.

4 **Evaluate Comparatively and Make Bundled Decisions.**

When we evaluate multiple candidates simultaneously as opposed to sequentially, our decision-making is less biased and the outcomes more diverse. Our brains naturally judge things comparatively, and in the absence of a direct comparison, we resort to the “prototypical person” as a comparison. Evaluating people in batches – whether for hiring, promotions, work allocation, funding opportunities, or pay increases and bonuses – can prevent this kind of stereotypical evaluation. In addition, whenever possible, make more than one decision at a time. Diversity is more likely to emerge when people make “portfolio decisions” than when they focus on one decision at a time.

**Evidence:**

Bohnet, I., van Geen, A., & Bazerman, M. (2015). [When Performance Trumps Gender Bias: Joint vs. Separate Evaluation.](#) *Management Science*, 62(5), 1225–1234.

Read, D., & Loewenstein, G., (1995). [Diversification bias: Explaining the discrepancy in variety seeking between combined and separated choices.](#) *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, 1(1), 34.

5 **Do Not Share Employees’ Self-Evaluations With Managers.**

When shared with managers in advance, employees’ self-evaluations become an anchor, or reference point, from which managers unconsciously adjust up or down to generate their own evaluations. Thus, managers do not come up with genuinely independent assessments of their employees’ capabilities. To avoid anchoring, do not share employees’ self-evaluations with managers ahead of time.

**Evidence:**

Morse, G. (2016). [Designing a Bias-Free Organization.](#) *Harvard Business Review*, 94(7/8), 62-67.

Epley, N. and Gilovich, T. (2006). [The anchoring-and-adjustment heuristic: Why the adjustments are insufficient.](#) *Psychological science*, 17(4), 311-318.



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ➔ [Applied](#) provides diversity recruitment tools that help businesses implement a fair and unbiased hiring process. [How to Take the Bias Out of Interviews](#), *Harvard Business Review*, 2016.
- [Interviewing job candidates? Try doing it blind](#), *Wired UK*, 2016.
- [7 Practical Ways to Reduce Bias in Your Hiring Process](#), *Harvard Business Review*, 2012.
- [Start-Ups Use Technology to Redesign the Hiring Process](#), *The New York Times*, 2017.
- [How to Keep Bias Out of the Hiring Process](#), *Quartz at Work*, 2017.
- [How Gender Bias Corrupts Performance Reviews, and What to Do About It](#), *Harvard Business Review*, 2017.



# POLICIES AND CULTURE

## 6 Debias Your Language.

Gendered language (words like “leader” and “individualistic”, which we generally associate with men, and “warm” and “collaborative”, which we generally associate with women) has been shown to attract talent disproportionately: men are more likely to apply to job advertisements with male-typed language and vice versa. Male-gendered language has also been shown to impede underrepresented groups’ sense of belonging within organizations. Take care to use inclusive, gender-neutral or gender-balanced language in job advertisements, internal communications, performance evaluations, feedback, and anywhere else language is used.

### Evidence:

Gaucher, D., Friesen, J., & Kay, A. C. (2011). [Evidence that gendered wording in job advertisements exists and sustains gender inequality](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(1), 109–128.

Trix, F., & Psenka, C. (2003). [Exploring the Color of Glass: Letters of Recommendation for Female and Male Medical Faculty](#). *Discourse & Society*, 14(2), 191–220.

## 7 Address Pay Inequity Through Targets and Transparency.

Set specific, measurable and actionable goals for how and when your organization will close its pay gap. Share compensation data and the results of regular pay audits as openly as possible within your organization, and consider making your numbers and action plans publicly available as well. Goals and targets have been shown to focus attention and mobilize resources while accountability has been shown to lead to less biased behaviors.

### Evidence:

Castilla, E.J. (2015). [Accounting for the Gap: A Firm Study Manipulating Organizational Accountability and Transparency in Pay Decisions](#). *Organization Science*, 26(2), 311-333.

## 8 Allocate Work Equally and Equitably.

Giving everyone an equal chance to succeed and showcase their abilities is essential to creating a level playing field at work. However, performance support bias has been shown to result in some people having more opportunities to shine than others – in other words, organizations support their employees differentially. Be aware of assigning “non-promotable” tasks disproportionately to women and people of color, or highly valued and visible “glamour work” disproportionately to men. And make sure that every employee has the same resources to succeed in the work.

### Evidence:

Babcock L., Recalde M. P., Vesterlund, & L., Weingart, L. (2017). [Gender Differences in Accepting and Receiving Requests for Tasks with Low Promotability](#). *American Economic Review*, 107(3), 714-747.

Madden, J.F. (2012). [Performance-support bias and the gender pay gap among stockbrokers](#). *Gender & Society*, 26(3), 488-518.



9

### Create Diverse, Balanced Teams.

Gender-diverse teams have higher collective intelligence and therefore perform better on a wide variety of tasks. Gender diversity on teams also helps both women and men to be seen as leaders and equal contributors. But numbers do matter: a diverse team ideally does not have any “onlys”, such as only one person who is meaningfully different from the other five as this invites tokenism. To maximize team performance and reap the full benefits of cognitive and experiential diversity, create teams that are gender-balanced as much as possible. It is better to have some balanced teams and some homogeneous teams, if necessary, rather than each team having just one or two individuals who differ from the norm.

#### Evidence:

Woolley, A. W., Chabris, C. F., Pentland, A., Hashmi, N., & Malone, T. W. (2010). [Evidence for a collective intelligence factor in the performance of human groups](#). *Science*, 330(6004), 686-688.

Hoogendoorn, S., Oosterbeek, H., & Van Praag, M. (2013). [The impact of gender diversity on the performance of business teams: Evidence from a field experiment](#). *Management Science*, 59(7), 1514-1528.

Gloor, J. L., Morf, M., Paustian-Underdahl, S., & Backes-Gellner, U. (2018). [Fix the Game, Not the Dame: Restoring Equity in Leadership Evaluations](#). *Journal of Business Ethics*, 1-15.

10

### Harness the Power of Symbols to Promote Inclusion.

An extensive body of research shows that role models help change behavior, and symbolic role models can influence people’s feelings of inclusion, exclusion and belonging. Examine the various symbols in your workplace – the pictures on your walls, the articles and photos on your website and marketing materials, the names of conference rooms and buildings, the people featured in the annual holiday video – and make sure that they represent the kind of workplace you want to be.

#### Evidence:

Dasgupta, N., & Asgari, S. (2004). [Seeing is believing: Exposure to counterstereotypic women leaders and its effect on the malleability of automatic gender stereotyping](#). *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40(5), 642-658.

Latu, I. M., Mast, M. S., Lammers, J., & Bombari, D. (2013). [Successful female leaders empower women's behavior in leadership tasks](#). *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49(3), 444-448.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

➡ [Textio](#) is an augmented writing platform that helps companies use more appealing, inclusive language.

The [Gender Bias Calculator](#) is a tool for flagging gendered language (female and male-associated words) in text.

[Gender Pay Gap: Closing it Together](#), UK Government.

[Want to Close the Pay Gap? Pay Transparency Will Help](#), *The New York Times*, 2019.

[How the BBC Women Are Working Toward Equal Pay](#), *The New Yorker*, 2018.

[Tackling ‘the Thin File’ That Can Prevent a Promotion](#), *The New York Times*, 2017

[Gender Diversity Is Urgently Needed Say Prominent Women In Technology](#), *Forbes*, 2018.

[Painting a new path at the Kennedy School](#), *The Harvard Crimson*, 2012.

