Bias in the Search Process and How You Might Mitigate Bias

Bias in the search process makes it difficult for schools to recruit, attract, and retain top leadership talent. Here are a few suggestions on how to check for, identify, and reduce implicit bias during the search process.

What Is Search Bias?

According to Harvard Business School, "unconscious or implicit bias is the mental processes that cause us to act in ways that reinforce stereotypes even when in our conscious mind we would deem that behavior counter to our value system. Closely related to unconscious bias is affinity bias in which people tend to gravitate towards others who look, act, and think as they do."

Bias in the search process in particular generally expresses itself as an unconscious preference towards certain candidates, or in the reverse, as an implicit aversion towards specific candidates or groups of candidates.

Implicit bias influences the search process in a number of ways, most notably by reducing diversity in candidate pools and introducing unconscious discrimination into a school's recruitment activity.

The 8 Types of Bias

Here are eight primary types of search bias, along with their potential impacts on a search:

1. Confirmation Bias

Confirmation bias is essentially the instinctual human tendency to develop preconceived notions with little to no background and then seek out information to support those established beliefs. This is in direct opposition to the practice of waiting to form an opinion until all information has been reviewed and considered.

2. Intuition Bias

Intuition bias can be defined as the judgment of candidates based on a person's intuition or "sixth sense." Instead of using facts and available data to determine the suitability of a candidate for the open position, that person may "trust their gut" or subconsciously elevate their first impression of a candidate above any information that has been provided to them.

3. Effective Heuristic Bias

Effective heuristic bias may sound the most complex, however, it's arguably one of the most common types of search and hiring biases. This type of bias occurs when a person weighs someone's ability to perform a particular job based on superfluous factors like piercings, tattoos, body weight, hair color, etc. Instead of a candidate being evaluated on their skills and their suitability for the position, they are judged and likely eliminated from the candidate pool due to factors completely unrelated to the job.

4. Beauty Contest Bias

The beauty contest bias occurs when a candidate does particularly well in an interview or is very charming but may lack the actual skills required for the available position. Search committee members end up personally liking the candidate and may not go back to the search criteria to confirm that the candidate does, in fact, have the skills and experience to be considered a good fit.

5. Deficit Hiring Bias

A deficit hiring bias, also known as a priming bias, occurs when a search committee subconsciously identifies skills and attributes that an individual who previously held a position lacked and then inadvertently assigns those attributes greater weight when evaluating potential candidates for the position.

6. Expectation Anchor Bias

The expectation anchor bias occurs when a consultant or search committee member has higher expectations for a specific candidate than others and perceives the candidate to have a superior skill or background. This bias causes a committee member to automatically consider other candidates less qualified for the available position, inherently impacting their desire and willingness to put in the work to fairly evaluate those candidates. Essentially, expectation anchor bias can be boiled down to favoritism.

7. Halo Bias

The halo bias occurs when a candidate comes from a prestigious or highly regarded background and is similar in nature to confirmation bias. For example, a candidate may be a graduate of a particular school that has an excellent reputation in the education community. As a consultant or search committee evaluates a candidate, the perception of the school unconsciously becomes a stand-in for their perception of the candidate themselves, and the committee begins to admire the candidate based on attributes of the school instead of the candidate.

8. The Affinity Bias

Affinity bias occurs when a consultant or search committee members inherently have a bias towards candidates who look, talk, dress, act, and think like they do. Harvard Business Review suggests it's one of the most common biases seen in the search process and often the most difficult to overcome. While having an affinity towards those who are most like us is a natural human response to other humans, it creates a number of challenges when it becomes a bias that impacts the search for leadership.

Identifying and Mitigating Search Bias

Identifying bias -- or the potential for bias -- prior to conducting a search is a critical component for success. Here are some questions you can ask to help recognize bias and how to mitigate it.

- **Is your search committee diverse enough?** It's difficult for a search committee to eliminate bias if the committee is comprised of individuals of similar races, physical abilities, sexualities, and backgrounds.
- **Do you have a standard candidate review and interview process?** Chances are, your search committee will be impacted by implicit bias without a set of standard guidelines that are the same for every candidate to fall back on.
- **Have you set diversity goals?** Your organization should have diversity, equity, and inclusion goals in place so your search committee understands where the school lacks diversity and where to expand inclusion.
- **Does your search committee know what search bias is and how to navigate around it?** A search committee should not only be as diverse as you want your institution to eventually be, but they should also be well educated about potential bias and how they can mitigate it on an individual and group level.

Some Suggested Videos

How to Outsmart Your Own Unconscious Bias | Valerie Alexander | TEDxPasadena 17:23min

Unconscious bias: Stereotypical hiring practices | Gail Tolstoi-Miller | TEDxLincolnSquare 10:32min

The Surprising Solution to Workplace Diversity | Arwa Mahdawi | TEDxHamburg 15:27min

Color blind or color brave? | Mellody Hobson | TED Talk 14:14min