

Overcoming *Unconscious Bias* in Recruitment and Hiring Practices

By Maisha Hagan



As recently as 2017, the term “cultural add” started showing up in the business lexicon. “Cultural fit” assesses how well a candidate or employee fits within the company today. Cultural add is more forward-looking, assessing how a candidate or employee can help move the company into the future.

If diversity, equity, and inclusion is a business priority in attracting and retaining talent, firms must resist the temptation to simply swap out terminology. Instead, they should analyze their formal and informal recruitment and hiring practices and look at areas where unconscious bias around culture exists within their processes.

Hiring Bias Disguised as “Cultural Fit”

Employers and hiring managers often list cultural fit as an important factor when selecting a candidate for employment. However, articles and surveys show employers and hiring managers had a hard time confidently defining culture and cultural fit. Case in point, according to John Traphagan, anthropologist and contributing author at *Harvard Business*

Review, “Culture is the values, practices, beliefs, etc. of a group of people. In other words, culture is everything.”¹ That said, how can culture be applied objectively to the hiring process?

“What most people mean by culture fit is hiring people they’d like to have a beer with,” says Patty McCord, HR consultant and former chief talent officer at Netflix. “You end up with this big, homogenous culture where everybody looks alike, everybody thinks alike, and everybody likes drinking beer at 3 o’clock in the afternoon with the bros,” she says.

Dr. Robert Cialdini refers to cultural fit as the Principle of Liking. Known as the founding expert in the science of influence, Dr. Cialdini builds his work, research, and books on seven principles of influence. These principles represent subconscious shortcuts our minds use when making decisions.

Among other things, the Principle of Liking says we’re more easily persuaded by and favor people who are similar to us. Consider, then, the potential

biases that exist around gender, perceived masculinity/femininity, race/culture, nationality and legal status, sexual orientation, political affiliation, religious belief and practice, education, family background, physical appearance, physical/cognitive disability, and lifestyle.

Why “Cultural Add” Is a Better Approach

Cultural add places significantly more value on the new ideas, perspectives, and experiences a candidate or employee brings to the organization, both now and in the future.

According to a post that first appeared on the Perkins&Will blog and was later reposted by the Zweig Group, “Evidence shows that companies that hire on or emphasize cultural fit struggle to innovate and change.² Finding people who fit culturally may be an easy way out, but the real reward is in finding and sustaining an office of people who add something special, even unique.”³

While cultural add may be a trendy term, it’s an approach worth considering. However, many A/E/C firms are designed and built for efficiency, not for innovation and exploration, especially when that innovation and exploration isn’t client-facing. More often than not, companies hire candidates they believe can produce fast results and profits rather than slow the machine down with questions, considerations, and challenges.

So how can companies overcome the unconscious bias around their recruitment and hiring practices and processes? Here are two places to start.

Traditional Recruitment Limitations

Firm leaders, hiring managers, and HR departments should not only want to change their recruitment efforts, but also understand they need to. And here’s why: Traditional recruitment tactics aren’t as effective as they used to be.



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Everybody’s doing the same thing.

Traditional recruitment tactics have included headhunters and recruiters, job postings on LinkedIn and Indeed, job fairs at local colleges and universities, and networking. These used to separate the bigger players from local, mom-and-pop operators. But in 2021, these are standard practices for companies of all sizes. Firms need to be open to exploring new opportunities and approaches (see “diversify your search” next page).

Everybody’s using the same job descriptions.

Job descriptions are an important recruitment tool; they help an employer communicate the particular skills and/or requirements necessary for a position. They also play an important role in training, performance evaluations, and determining pay increases. Yet despite their importance, job descriptions often fall prey to generic language.





Longwood University
Residence Halls,
Farmville, VA. Little
Diversified Architectural
Consulting. ©Sterling E.
Stevens, sestevens.com.

The Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) recommends a six-step process that emphasizes job analysis as the first step. The first step alone can take hours, days, or even weeks to develop—time that some hiring managers feel they don't have. Although software and templates help to expedite the process, it's an easy assumption that most of this "writing" is copying and pasting text from similar job descriptions on the internet. This can often produce impersonal and unoriginal job descriptions. Furthermore, the descriptions may have some relevance to an industry, but little to no relevance to the hiring firm or specific opportunity. Set aside the time needed and invest in writing job descriptions that truly speak to your firm's needs and culture.

Candidates can peek behind the curtain. Websites like Glassdoor, Indeed, and Fairy Godboss allow candidates to gather and share intel about the candidate experience (CX) and employee experience (EX) including hiring practices, culture, and management before applying or interviewing. If your work environment is cited as hostile to minorities, dismissive of people's experiences, or steeped in bias, candidates can discover that information before they apply or walk through your office doors.

For example, fairygodboss.com touts itself as "the largest career community for women." It allows women to anonymously post reviews on job satisfaction, whether women are treated fairly, and whether they're promoted equally to men.

As the hiring firm, regularly monitoring these sites can shed light on CX and EX experiences being shared. Repeated concerns can provide valuable insights about needed changes for firm executives to consider.

Nontraditional Recruitment and Retention Tactics

A/E/C firms need to be intentional about changing their recruiting practices, not just their policies. Here are some ways to get started.

Reconsider requiring industry and years of experience. Years of experience is important; however, years of doing the same tasks doesn't always equal results, competence, or efficiency. When employers require years of experience in a specific role or put undue importance on industry experience, they run the risk of disregarding qualified candidates looking to change industries or pursue stretch roles. This is especially relevant for Black, brown, and other minority groups who haven't historically been represented in the A/E/C industries.

Diversify your search. As mentioned earlier, traditional recruitment tactics aren't as effective as they used to be. That doesn't mean hiring firms should abandon them, but they should diversify their search strategy. In addition to recruiting at state colleges and universities, firms can develop similar relationships with local community colleges and HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities; institutions of higher education that were established before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with the intention of primarily serving the African-American

community). Additionally, they can partner with multicultural fraternities and sororities such as the Divine Nine or National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations members. There are also several job boards that cater to minority groups.⁴

The key is intention, not passivity, and diversity strategies, not just diversity statements. Waiting for candidates to come to you isn't going to significantly move the needle. When companies partner with organizations that serve and are present at events that celebrate diverse communities, they're saying to members of that community "We see you; we value you; and we want you."

Decentralize and remove cues around résumé reviews and interviews. Remember that bias can be unconscious. Therefore, one strategy to minimize its impact on recruitment and hiring is to decentralize résumé reviews. Rather than having one person screen candidates, imagine a process where a diverse committee of existing employees from various departments or teams review résumés and possibly interview candidates. A committee with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and roles within the company will inevitably screen for different criteria, leading to much more dynamic conversations about potential candidates.

Another strategy being used by firms is to remove cues about candidates before forwarding résumés to the hiring manager. In the February 2021 *Marketer* case study by Thelma Goodson, "Maintaining D&I Focus on Recruitment: JQ Engineering," the company "created a recruiting process that starts with eliminating unconscious résumé bias before moving to in-person meetings, conversations, and face-to-face interactions." The company's full-time recruiter forwards all top candidate résumés to team leads with the candidate names and universities redacted.

According to Goodson, "Blocking out the names or any information that might allude to a specific race, gender, or religion helps to eliminate unintentional bias. With these redactions in place, hiring managers select candidates for interviews based purely on qualifications and merit."

Emphasize mentorship programs and employee resource groups. Mentorship programs have long proven to be beneficial for employees and employers alike. According to Guider:⁵

- 71% of Fortune 500 companies have mentoring programs
- 89% of those with mentors believe their colleagues value their work, compared with 75% who don't have mentors
- Mentoring programs boost minority representation at the management level from 9% to 24%
- 67% of businesses report an increase in productivity due to mentoring
- Promotion and retention rates for minorities and women increase from 15% to 38% as compared to unmentored employees

Employee resource groups (ERGs), sometimes referred to as affinity groups, are also incredibly valuable for employee retention. Besides being collectives for shared culture and experiences, these groups allow employees to sharpen their leadership skills and benefit from the intrinsic knowledge held by other employees. These groups became safe spaces for Black and Asian employees to process and discuss the violence and tragedies their respective communities experienced throughout 2020 and 2021. ERGs are one retention tactic firms can use to recognize and support their diverse workforce in relevant ways.

Firms often tout their people as the differentiator from other competitors in the marketplace. They recognize that their success directly correlates to their employees' knowledge, approaches, experiences, and perspectives. As we move forward in this brave new world, organizations that prioritize cultural add over cultural fit will find themselves benefiting the most. An intentional approach to candidate attraction, screening, and interviewing, as well as engaging employees, is key to helping remove unconscious bias in the recruitment and hiring process. ■

Resources

- ¹ "Why 'Company Culture' Is a Misleading Term," John Traphagan, *Harvard Business Review*, April 21, 2015. hbr.org/2015/04/why-company-culture-is-a-misleading-term
- ² Adam Grant: Hire for Culture Fit or Add? youtube.com/watch?v=mLHp25mUd40
- ³ "Cultural Fit vs. Cultural Add," Yukari Yamahiro, *The Zweig Letter*, April 23, 2018. thezweigletter.com/cultural-fit-vs-cultural-add
- ⁴ "The Top 20 Job Boards for Diversity Hiring," Breezy, April 24, 2020. breezy.hr/blog/top-20-job-boards-diversity-hiring
- ⁵ "Mentoring Statistics: The Research You Need To Know," Nicola Cronin, Guider, February 3, 2020. guider-ai.com/blog/mentoring-statistics-the-research-you-need-to-know



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