

Are Blind Auditions Tomorrows Newest Hiring Trend?



The concept of perception bias or unconscious bias is not new but it has jumped out of the realm of psychology and into the popular consciousness with increasing frequency over the past few years.

Unconscious bias impacts everything people do and the truth is that unconscious bias can play a positive role in survival. Unconscious bias can allow you to make quick, snap, judgements about people or situations that can turn out to be useful judgements in helping you avoid negative situations. Unfortunately in normal, day-to-day situations unconscious bias often has the potential to do more harm than good because it impacts your ability to make fair assessments and decisions that may lead to even better results. This is often the case in the workplace where the unconscious bias of people can negatively impact the hiring, promotion, performance review and more ways that harm individuals and can hold the organization back from innovation and adaptation.

What do we know about the unconscious bias in hiring

In perhaps the most famous example used to demonstrate the impact of unconscious bias in hiring the 1952 male dominated Boston Symphony decided to hold blind auditions in an attempt to increase the representation of women in the symphony. At that time many people held the bias that women simply were not able to perform to the level of men in the symphony while others felt that women were not being fairly assessed. In an attempt to remove any unconscious bias from the hiring process the symphony held auditions where the aspiring musicians auditioned behind a partition, thereby hiding their appearance as male or female. The result of this blind audition proved what many believed, that the male aspiring musicians were indeed better as they were selected far more than the women.

What does your perception tell you about that result? In fact that was the

result, the males were selected during these blind auditions far more than the women. However, in a demonstration of how insidious a perception bias can be it turned out that these blind auditions were not so blind. While the selection committee could not see the gender of the auditioning musicians their unconscious mind was still able to register which of the musicians were male and which were female, and that bias resulted in more males being selected. How do we know that the unconscious perception bias was in play? It turned out that the unconscious mind of the selection committee members was so adept at looking for cues of gender that the sounds of the footfalls of the auditioning musicians were enough to turn on the bias, as in most cases the women who were auditioning wore high heels and the males did not. When the auditions were held again and all musicians were asked to remove their shoes the result in the next round of selection lead to and almost exactly 50% women and 50% men.

Overcoming Bias with Blind Auditions

More and more organizations today recognize the value of diversity in hiring. A 2015 McKinsey and Company research report, "Why Diversity Matters" noted that organizations who had more racial and ethnic and more gender diversity returned higher revenues compared to organizations in the same industries and in same geographies.

A growing trend in hiring today is to try to remove the unconscious bias from the hiring process. In many cases people believe that the ATS system accomplishes this by focussing on the content in the application and not the applicant. However, as we have seen from the Boston symphony bias is often hidden and difficult to spot and ATS systems are not currently able to minimize this risk

How can your organization begin to address the hidden bias in your selection process? It is not easy but there are a few things you can do.

4 Steps to minimize unconscious bias

Step 1) Invite Diversity Representation to the party: The first think you need to do to minimize bias in hiring is to not have hidden bias in your recruitment process. This means checking your recruitment materials, strategy and activities to draw diversity into the process. To do this you may have to run your recruiting strategy and activities by individuals of diversity (remember that includes not only gender and race but disability, believe, orientation and more).

Step 2) Tell the Candidates to take their shoe off: Common information on a resume such as the candidates address, name of education institution, GPA and even names of previous employers can impact the resume review and selection process. Recent research from organizations like Deloitte and Google have demonstrated that factors such as GPA and educational institution are not predictors of employee performance. To minimize unconscious bias in candidate resume selection do not provide the screeners with access to this information early in the process.

Step 3) Embrace Your Inner Millennial: Try screening candidates through IM (Instant messaging) interview chats in addition to or in place of phone screening or as a component of the interview process. Having another interviewer interact in a different way with a candidate and then come together and share

their feedback with the first interviewer may reveal some interesting results.

Step 4) Tell Your Managers About the 1952 Boston Symphony: One of the best ways to overcome hidden unconscious bias is to expose it and educate people about how to reduce it. Research has also demonstrated that when people are aware of their bias they can take steps to address it. Additionally expose your selection and hiring managers to a diverse pool of success stories so they can challenge their own unconscious bias in hiring.

Hiring for diversity is not only about not screening out candidates who are diverse it is also about screening in those whose diversity can benefit the organization. Becoming consciously aware of the value of diversity hiring can also help your organization overcome barriers to diversity hiring.