

Seven steps to gender-blind recruitment

The legal bit...

Gender is one of the nine protected characteristics covered by the Equality Act 2010 (the "Act"). The others include age, disability, race and religion or belief. This document focuses on gender. The Act protects a wide category of individuals from discrimination in employment, and protects both job applicants and those in employment.

As job applicants are protected, it is important to adopt fair and transparent recruitment practices. Clearly, it is generally unlawful to discriminate against another individual on grounds of gender. However, the Act contains a number of exceptions that an employer may rely on when faced with a gender discrimination claim.

These include where there is a genuine occupational requirement that given the nature or context of the work, being a man or a woman is necessary and crucial to the post.

In addition to this, the Act contains provisions relating to positive recruitment. This is designed to apply where a particular gender group may be under-represented in the workforce.

Why gender-blind recruitment?

First, it is important to distinguish between gender-blind recruitment, and gender-positive recruitment. As outlined above, it is generally illegal to make recruitment decisions based solely on someone's gender – but it may be permissible where clients are looking to redress structural imbalances in their workforce makeup. The legal aspects of such gender-positive recruitment can be complex, so you should take specific legal advice if you are in doubt.

However, this document focuses on ways to support gender-blind recruitment: that is, to establish processes which attract and select candidates regardless of their gender, and solely according to their suitability for the job at hand. Applied correctly, these steps should also help to eliminate other recruitment biases.

While we have focused this document on attracting female candidates, as this is where the gender imbalance typically lies, it is important to note that both genders are protected under the Act.

This is by no means a definitive guide, but will help eliminate some of the most obvious issues which have traditionally disadvantaged female candidates.

Give unconscious bias training

The key to any bias-free recruiting is encouraging your hiring managers to stop 'buying themselves'. Challenge them on their real reasons behind a hiring decision: if 'comfort' or simply 'I liked them' is the underlying reason behind the decision to hire, it is not enough. We are comfortable, subconsciously, with people like us: to improve diversity, you may sometimes have to go outside your comfort zone. Unconscious bias training can at least alert you to the behavior that might be leading you into a recruitment cul-de-sac.

There are many courses available on how to avoid unconscious bias – some of them relatively inexpensive and digitally-delivered. We use [Cylix's Challenging Unconscious Bias](#) platform as a simple primer.

But such courses on their own are not enough: you also need to change practices and approaches in order to ensure that they are being put into effect. The following pages describe how to change some of those practices throughout the recruitment process.

Job descriptions: Watch your language...

The first thing is to understand how the recruitment process itself can perpetuate gender bias. Job descriptions and adverts can actively discourage female applicants by their use of language, and the framing of the requirements for the role.

There is a great summary of how to approach job descriptions from Glassdoor [here](#). But broadly, it breaks down to using gender neutral titles and pronouns in job descriptions (s/he or 'you'); avoiding aggressive or superlative language; limiting or reconsidering specific requirements for the role (we will return to this on page 5); and promoting the positive values of your business – your commitment to equality, flexibility of working conditions, and any charitable or voluntary work you do.

Job descriptions: Keep the brief brief...

Research suggests that women will typically only apply for a role if they feel comfortable with 100% of the requirements – [men will apply if they fit 60%](#). So limit the number of requirements in any published material to the bare minimum.

Specifically, we see a massive impact in gender balance depending on the perceived necessity of experience in a particular sector. If a client insists – for example – on experience in a male-dominated sector such as the oil and gas sector, they are automatically restricting the number of women who might be suitable.

So ask yourself, is the few months' advantage that someone's address book or experience will give you worth sacrificing the advantages of a fresh approach or some really smart thinking? When we carry out a search, we always look at adjacent markets and encourage our clients to keep an open mind. It is interesting that around 70% of the CEOs we placed last year were women, usually hired for their business nous rather than sector-specific experience.

Candidate screening: No name recruitment

This sounds simplistic, but extensive research shows that people frequently pre-judge a CV by the name at the top. Many studies have used exactly the same CVs with different names and seen markedly different results according to whether there was a female or male name at the top.

Where a role has been advertised or external applicants sought, take steps before the initial screening process to anonymise the relevant documents. Ask someone not involved in the decision-making process to remove names and other obvious gender signifiers from the application documents: CVs, covering letters, etc. We're never quite sure why people include photographs in any case, but these should also be taken off. And left off.

Candidate screening: Don't show me the money...

There are many reasons why the gender pay gap is pernicious: one of them is that many recruiters judge the seniority of a candidate by what they are paid. This means that a woman doing the same job in an organisation with a 20% GPG would be undervalued by potential future employers as well. And any future offer is likely to reflect the candidate's previous pay, thus perpetuating the nonsense. For this reason, [it is illegal to ask for someone's salary](#) during the recruitment process in New York State: we suspect this will become the norm in due course.

Again, we would recommend that someone (not a decision maker) checks the 'housekeeping' details (visa, salary, location, notice period, etc) and, if they fall within the parameters of the role, allows the candidates' anonymised and sanitised profiles to go through for assessment by DMs. This allows the DMs to focus on what they need to – the candidate's suitability for the role – without unnecessary and distracting baggage.

Interviews: Prepare the ground

Again, simple but critical: before you begin your first interview, sit down and devise a series of questions, based on the job description, which address each of the key challenges of the role you are recruiting for.

Remember the first tip – watch how you phrase things to make sure they are inclusive – and try to make the questions open in order to allow the candidates room to answer in their own ways, rather than within predetermined guidelines.

The point of this is to ensure that everyone gets an equal chance to address their suitability for each part of the role, in their own way. Having planned questions also stops ‘co-interested’ chit-chat with the interviewer of the sort that allows persuasive candidates to slip through, and means that everyone will be judged against the same criteria when decisions are made.

Interviews: The wisdom of two

We always try to have two people in each interview – and where possible, have one interviewer of each gender. The co-interviewer does not need to have the same seniority as the DM, as long as they have no fear of expressing their opinion to the DM. It is best to try and keep the same pairing for every interview for the same role to ensure consistency.

At the end of every interview, and before any informal discussion, the two interviewers should separately score the candidate against the key criteria, and then compare notes. We score from 5 to 1 (5 being best) and then maintain a spreadsheet of all the scores throughout the search. This provides a handy guide on the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate, but also allows you to reassess candidates later in the search if criteria change.

Finally...

Having completed all stages of the recruitment process, let's assume you have decided on Candidate X as your first ever female head of sales. Because of the structural gender imbalance in your industry, though, she is paid £10k less in her current role than the European Sales Director who will report into her, and £50k less than her predecessor, Y. Result! You can save yourself £30k on the wage bill and still give her a £20k pay rise. Right?

Wrong. Pay X what you would have paid anyone else for the job; at least match what Y was paid. Yes, it may be a whopping pay rise but the consequences of penny-pinching here are not just moral ones. First, it avoids future embarrassment (or even potential litigation) if X discovers that she is paid substantially less than her predecessor: and, second, it will prevent X being able to hire the quality of people under her who might be required as they are likely to be paid as much as she is.

But, third, it sends a real signal to her and the rest of your company and industry that you really do value female employees and the experience they bring. The benefits you will receive in terms of employee attraction and loyalty will far outweigh the initial financial downside.

Martin Tripp Associates is a London-based executive search consultancy. While we are best-known for our work across the media, information, technology, communications and entertainment sectors, we have also worked with some of the world's biggest brands on challenging senior positions. Feel free to contact us to discuss any of the issues raised here.

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