

How Typical Recruiting Mistakes Undermine Diversity Goals

By Roy Maurer

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The recruiting and hiring process is key to achieving a diverse workforce. It's also an area where common mistakes can undercut an employer's commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) goals.

Michael S. Cohen, a partner in the Philadelphia office of Duane Morris, presented the following scenario: The organization is saying all the right things around DE&I, but the levels of diversity that they're trying to achieve are frustratingly out of reach.

"What's going on?" he asked attendees at the SHRM Talent Conference & Expo 2022 in Denver on April 11. "You're looking to hire the most qualified individual for the job, you're embracing DE&I, you're ensuring compliance with legal requirements and are aware of implicit bias, but there are still common hiring mistakes in the pre-applicant stage and during interviews that devalue the important DE&I initiatives that are being undertaken by the company."

Pre-Interview Steps

The pre-interview stage of hiring is incredibly important for DE&I, Cohen said. One of the biggest problem areas is job descriptions.

Job descriptions written with DE&I in mind create a level playing field for all potential applicants, allowing less bias to creep into the interview stage. That's because job descriptions form the basis for the all-important interview questions.

Cohen reminded attendees that writing job descriptions is not HR's job, but it is critical for HR and recruiting leaders to impart to hiring managers that job descriptions should accurately reflect what the person will be doing in their role.

Cohen's No. 1 peeve about job description criteria is the automatic inclusion of a four-year college degree requirement.

"Stop asking for this. It's a simple way to meaningfully enhance socioeconomic diversity, which leads to other kinds of diversity, in one action," he said. "There are good reasons people don't go to college. Many people can't afford it. Every time you see this requirement on a requisition, ask, 'Why?' If there is not a really good answer for it, remove it."

Being set on prior work experience is a similar obstacle. "Stop thinking that people need a certain set of prior experiences to fulfill the job you need them to fill," Cohen said. "Some roles require certain prior experience, but many don't."

Sourcing is another area where diversity can be sabotaged. "Internal recommendations and referrals are valuable, but there are possible DE&I risks with this method," he said. "Candidate referrals from existing employees have a lower likelihood of being diverse. If that becomes the main crop of candidates, you won't achieve the level of diversity you want to achieve."

Cohen recommended diversifying external sources where targeted recruiting is conducted. Eliminating geographic boundaries is another way to increase diversity.

"Recruiting leaders tell me, 'Based on where I am, the type of diversity we want to achieve just doesn't exist.' To which I respond, 'Have we learned nothing over the last two years?' Offering remote and hybrid roles will provide you with more chances to diversify," he said.

Interview Questions That Hurt DE&I

Sticking to a uniform list of job-related questions created by managers and HR will enhance diversity because it will help prevent interviewers from going off script or letting biases creep in, Cohen said.

Interviewers absolutely should stay away from asking questions related to someone's membership in an equal employment opportunity-protected class.

He said hiring managers often ask questions like "When did you graduate high school?", "What kind of military discharge did you get?", "Where does that accent come from?", "Are you married?", "Do you have kids?" and "Are you pregnant?"

"If you ask about one of these categories, even if innocently, it looks like their age or their national origin matters," he said. "And then when they are not hired because they weren't the most qualified for the role, they will tell their lawyer it was because of that reason, because you spent 30 minutes talking about it during the interview."

Subjects to stay away from include:

- Age.
- Citizenship.
- Disabilities/ medical conditions.
- Military status/veteran status.
- National origin/ancestry.
- Race/skin color.
- Criminal convictions.
- Religion.
- Pregnancy/parental status.
- Sexual orientation.
- Marital status.

[SHRM members-only toolkit: Guidelines on Interview and Employment Application Questions (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/interviewandemploymentapplicationquestions.aspx)]

Being Aware of Implicit Bias

Cohen said recruiters and hiring managers need to be aware of implicit bias—the attitudes or stereotypes that affect understanding, actions and decisions in an unconscious manner.

"We're not even aware that these biases exist, and yet they impact our decision-making," he said.

"These biases favor people like ourselves. They are informed by how we've been socialized or our contextual lens through which we view the world around us and the people in it."

Affinity bias is the type of implicit bias to be most aware of in hiring, he said. Affinity bias is the tendency to act favorably toward people with similar backgrounds or experiences.

"Interviewers may have a tendency to hire candidates who attended the interviewer's alma mater, grew up in their hometown or like the same music," Cohen said.

Practices for confronting affinity bias include:

- Sticking to a uniform list of job-related questions as much as possible.
- Diversifying the interview panel as much as possible.
- Not relying heavily on cultural fit. Focus more on cultural add (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/ditch-the-beer-test-and-start-hiring-for-culture-add.aspx), or what new factors a candidate may bring to the organization.

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