

Recruiting for belonging

How to build an inclusive recruitment process that reduces bias, removes barriers, and improves access.

Table of Contents

P. 05 — CHAPTER 01

First things first: Understanding structural discrimination

P. 12 — CHAPTER 02

Turning the tide: Bias in the sourcing process

P. 26 — CHAPTER 03

Putting interviews and assessments in the hot seat

P. 34 — CHAPTER 04

Understanding the marginalised candidate experience

Introduction

In the past few years, we've seen huge shifts in the way we work. The shift to remote and flexible ways of working, a global skills gap, and a growing call for companies to take accountability for endemic bias in their hiring practices have left organisations scrambling to find stable ground.

It's no wonder that our recruitment processes have fallen behind.

In this shifting landscape, it's never been easier to find amazing people, but hiring successfully is much harder.

And with candidates fielding fistfuls of offers, an inclusive recruitment process is your key differentiator.

That's because when you approach recruitment with inclusion in mind, it communicates to your candidates that your organisation is a place that they can work at their best — and where they can feel safe showing up as themselves.

Creating an inclusive recruitment process requires organisations to put candidates first, not hiring targets. It requires organisations to consider experiences, not diversity metrics. Above all, it requires a willingness to sit with uncomfortable truths, and unintentional errors — and take accountability for doing better.

So how do you create a more inclusive hiring process — and what actions can you take to kickstart this journey?

In this guide, we'll explain

- What structural discrimination is, and how it applies to the recruitment process.
- How to identify where your own recruitment process might be unintentionally excluding people.
- The actions you can take to create a more inclusive process.

We created this guide to assist organisations to create a more inclusive recruitment process. But as you read our resource, remember that your end goal isn't to 'fix' your hiring process so that more folks from marginalised groups apply to your roles.

Organisations can be diverse, but not inclusive — and they can be inclusive but not equitable. Creating a more inclusive hiring process is a great starting point, but what follows after that is equally important.

That's why we recommend you use this resource as part of your wider diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategy. When you view your recruitment process as part of a holistic DEI journey, it's easier to see how it connects to the rest of your organisation, and contributes directly to creating a workplace where everyone feels that they can thrive.

First things first: Understanding structural discrimination

“One fatal flaw is when companies only approach structural discrimination in the workplace from an institutional perspective. This is too simplistic — and it fails to recognise how different levels of discrimination constantly reinforce each other.”



Samet Akti

SENIOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION COMMS MANAGER, ZALANDO, AND
DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION CONSULTANT, STRATEGIST, AND SPEAKER

You’d think that if we’re writing a guide about exclusion in the recruitment process, we’d start things off from the very first point a candidate enters your hiring pipeline. After all, that makes sense — you’re here to learn how each stage of your hiring process can become a challenge for exclusion, and how to identify your biggest challenges.

And we’ll get there, we promise.

But here’s the thing: Bias and discrimination don’t start the second a candidate enters your hiring funnel. They don’t end when a candidate leaves it.

That’s because the hiring process doesn’t exist in a silo — it’s the product of the society we live in. And our society has a long history of oppression, discrimination, and marginalisation that have embedded structures and systems that hold some groups of people back.

These things didn't emerge coincidentally either — they were built intentionally to keep power in some people's hands, and keep it from others.

That means we can't explain how the hiring process routinely excludes some candidates and rewards others without an understanding of the larger context around why that keeps happening.

And that's down to structural discrimination.

"Our society is built on this notion that there's a social hierarchy in place categorising people based on their identity traits — the boxes they check. This gives rise to structural discrimination.

Structural discrimination means that there's no place in society that is free of discrimination. It's rooted within our society's structure.

Structural discrimination consists of three levels — all of which intersect and stabilise one another. We see it on an individual level — so each person's discriminatory speech or actions.

We also see it on a cultural level, which captures the public discourse — our norms, social values, and representation in media. And finally, it exists on an institutional level, which refers to all of the policies, laws, and customs carried out by institutions.

All of these dimensions of structural discrimination interact to deny equal access to resources and recognition based on their membership to certain diversity dimensions."

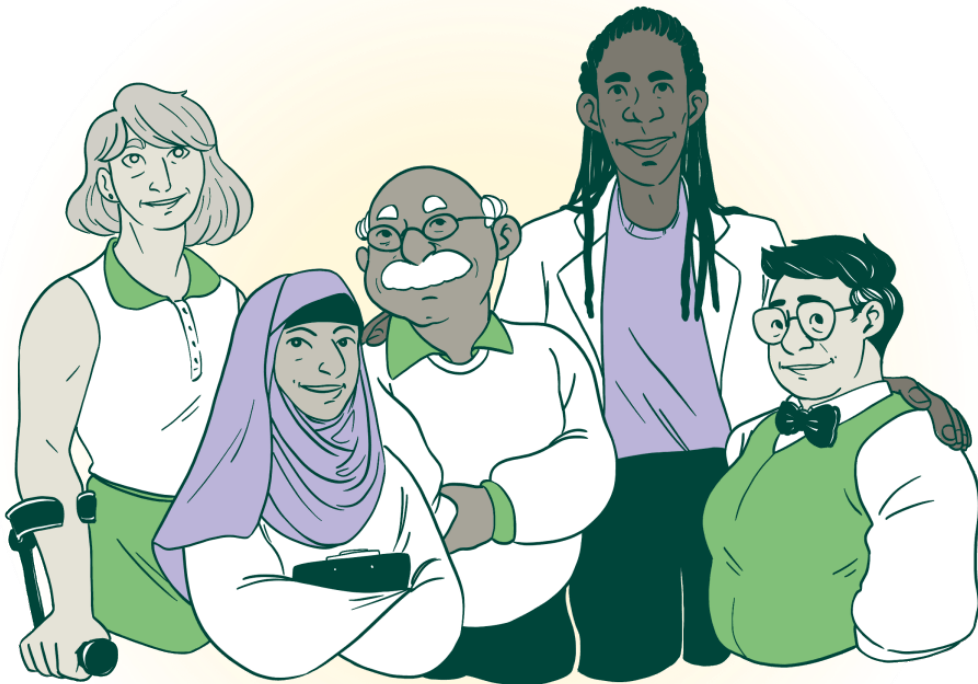


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Structural discrimination exists everywhere. It impedes access to care in marginalised communities, **leading to worse health outcomes.** It impacts access to education, because schools in low-income areas are often under-resourced. And during the COVID-19 pandemic, it meant that office-based workers got to work from home, while workers on shift work, or in lower-paid roles **faced increased exposure to the virus.**

So it shouldn't be a surprise that it shows up in our recruitment process, too.



How structural discrimination impacts the recruitment process

The hiring process is a product of the structural discrimination that already exists in our society. Every step and process — from sourcing candidates to interviewing and making decisions — is shaped by these ingrained structures we've created as a society to exclude or hold people back.

"We can't divorce talent attraction from the larger issue of how structural discrimination shows up in the hiring process. Because you can try to attract a more diverse candidate pool, but if you don't know how to foster inclusion, then people will leave when they don't feel they belong."

Attracting 'diverse' talent means promising a workplace where people who have been marginalised in multiple ways — both historically, and in their own experiences — feel they can thrive, grow, and do their best work, and be appreciated and compensated for it fairly."



Emil Novák-Tót

HEAD OF RESEARCH, DEVELOP DIVERSE

Often, because we're so intent on running a 'fair' recruitment process, we don't realise that in doing so, we're perpetuating the very system that excludes people in the first place.

In the recruitment process, structural discrimination shows up in a number of ways, including:

- A job description that requires a specific number of years of experience or qualifications that means folks from varying backgrounds can't apply.
- Inequitable compensation packages that offer some people less than others for the same role.
- Making a decision on a candidate due to 'gut feel'.
- An internal candidate referral process that introduces halo bias.
- Describing required language proficiency as "native-level" or similar.

Structural discrimination is at play when people are asked to picture a leader, and they very often picture a man. They come in when we have a certain expectation of the amount of experience or level of education required for a role, and when our ideal candidate is a fresh graduate, rather than someone older.

But viewing these instances in isolation is too simplistic, explains Samet, because it minimises how structural discrimination acts on multiple different levels at once.

“One fatal flaw is when companies only approach structural discrimination in the workplace from an institutional perspective. And that makes sense — because we’re having the conversation in a corporate context. But this is too simplistic — and it fails to recognise how different levels of discrimination constantly reinforce each other.

Let’s imagine a tech recruiter hiring for a software engineer. They might discriminate against an applicant by rejecting them at the sourcing stage because the role is a male-dominated field. At a subconscious level, the recruiter may think that a woman might not be able to do the job as well as a man. That’s individual discrimination.

The recruiter’s company doesn’t question, because they have given the recruiter decision-making power. There’s the institutional discrimination.

That company is embedded in a society that systematically devalues women, and doesn’t provide them with enough resources and access to opportunities. Women aren’t typically portrayed in the media following this career path, and aren’t trusted at work. That’s cultural discrimination.

Structural discrimination is complex and simultaneous; one continuously reinforces the other two.”



Samet Akti

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Building a more inclusive recruitment process means staying cognisant of this larger context, and how it contributes to people's experiences and perceptions of how they'll be treated by organisations.

As you read through this guide, we'll guide you to reflect on how your own processes may be unintentionally excluding folks from different backgrounds and reinforce our existing structural challenges.

You'll be able to see how folks from different backgrounds come into your hiring process with their own experiences and worldviews, and the subtle ways in which anything from a single word in your job advert to your candidate assessment process can cause that candidate to feel even more excluded.

And once you understand these situations, you can use our actionable takeaways in each chapter to guide you in the right direction and make intentional changes that ensure long-term belonging.

Turning the tide: Bias in the sourcing process

“The language in job adverts is a minefield of tiny yellow, orange, and red flags. Those flags might be undetectable to others — but for marginalised folks, they accumulate, and they implicitly signal exclusion.”



Emil Novák-Tót

HEAD OF RESEARCH, DEVELOP DIVERSE

At the very beginning of a job search, candidates often only have your words to go on. Each choice you make to describe your role, company, or even to make a post on social media can trigger snap-second judgements on whether or not your company will be a safe space where your candidate can thrive.

And very often, even the most well-intentioned of organisations don't realise the implicit signals they're sending out that make them feel like an unwelcoming place for a marginalised person — either because they communicate bias, or specific social or cultural expectations.

These coded signals are everywhere — but what's their impact?

We analysed over 5,000 job adverts across the UK and Nordics countries to find out — and we found out that not only do job adverts become more non-inclusive at higher levels of seniority, but also they're least inclusive to neurodivergent people.

Non-inclusive language increases with role seniority

Understanding bias in language

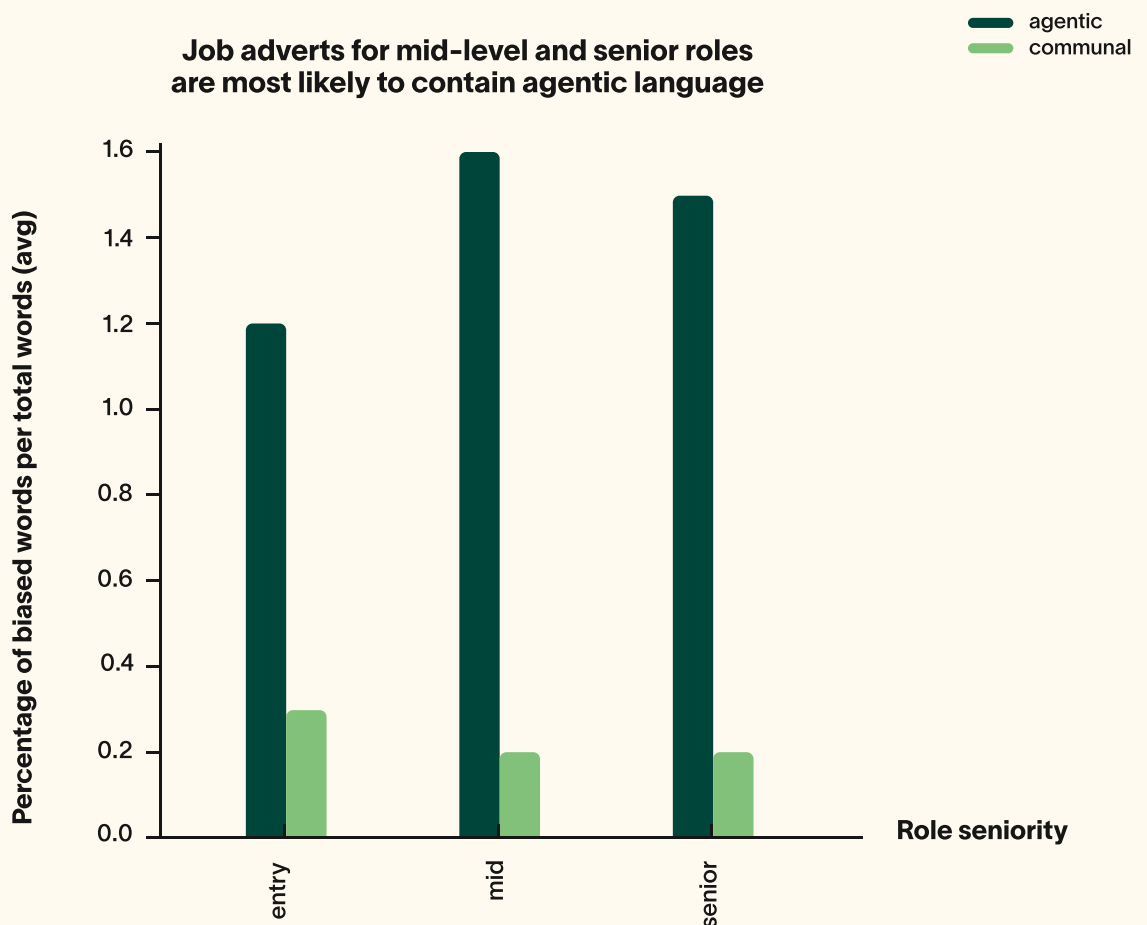
We often see biased language referred to as either masculine- or feminine-coded. We prefer to use the terms 'agentic' and 'communal' instead, because they better respond to the need to understand the impact of language beyond a gender binary.

- **Agentic language** — often referred to as 'masculine-coded' — describes traits and characteristics that are commonly associated with male gender stereotypes. Examples include: confident, assertive, ambitious.
- **Communal language**, or 'feminine-coded language', describes traits associated with female gender stereotypes. Examples include: supportive, compassionate, helpful.

In current business cultural norms, we expect leaders to talk the talk. It's a lexicon that communicates authority and gravitas simply often by the words we use. It's the language of hierarchy. Often, it creates barriers — and that's definitely something we observed in job adverts for leadership roles.

We found that **agentic language** in job adverts increases as roles become more senior, while **communal language** decreases. Entry-level roles comprised 1.2% agentic language out of the total language used, but mid-level manager positions and senior roles were higher, coming in at **1.6%** and **1.5%** respectively.

In mid-level and senior roles, the difference was equivalent to four agentic words for every communal one.



Mid-level roles were most likely to see higher levels of biased language than any other role level. And if we dig a little deeper, we can have a possible reason for this result. Organisations are more likely to source executive and senior candidates from their networks, rather than relying on traditional recruiting channels — meaning they're narrowing the pool to begin with.

And that's a problem.

Talking the talk is a huge barrier to improving diversity in leadership

We already know that there's been a leaky pipeline for women in leadership for some time. Data from Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, found that in 2021, women comprised 46.3% of the EU workforce, yet held only 35.5% of manager roles. Globally speaking, women held only 31% of senior roles.

Research consistently shows that agentic language in job adverts sustains gender inequality. According to a 2022 study, job adverts with higher levels of communal language are associated with lower salaries.

But this isn't just a gendered issue; higher levels of agentic language impact everyone negatively. And let's be clear — it's not the words themselves that are inherently wrong. It's how we interpret them as a society that's causing organisations to trip up.

Agentic words, like 'confident' and 'assertive', are more commonly found in roles for leadership positions. When used in a job advert, they uphold gender-normative stereotypes about the people we expect to see in leadership positions, even when it's unintentional. And usually, that's cisgender men.

Here's the kicker: It's not anyone's *fault*. Our brains are designed to spot patterns, and create shortcuts that make our lives easier, and language is distorted by our sociocultural lens.

But to marginalised folks, using agentic language at the earliest point in your hiring process creates a barrier to access. It signals that you're looking for a specific type of person, either consciously or unconsciously based on the stereotypes we all grew up with. It also signals that even if they did take a role, your organisation wouldn't feel welcoming to them.

That has a knock-on impact on — well — everything. It impacts who gets in the interview room, who gets the role, and who gets promoted to a senior role. And thus, that representation at the job impacts who wants to join your company, and everything comes full circle.

It's a bit like dominoes.

"We often believe that there's a certain prototype of what success looks like in a particular role — so we create this cookie cutter and language of what we think that looks like. That's the first point at which our biases become embedded.

Most organisations are aware of the obvious language we shouldn't use as part of a job advert. But they're not always aware of the more subtle words they use frequently as part of their cookie cutter expectations for a role, and how that makes people feel.

Take the word 'confident', for example. On the face of it, 'confident' is a pretty good word — it seems neutral.



Dr. Poornima Luthra

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL,
CEO AND FOUNDER, TALENTED CONSULTANCY APS

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Of course we want to hire a confident leader who can go out there and speak to people.

But what does that actually mean? When we say ‘confident’, it has a specific undertone. We think of an extroverted person — a social person. This kind of language often comes from a place of good intention, but when we use it, we’re making an assumption that the right person for the role demonstrates those traits.”



Dr. Poornima Luthra

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL,
CEO AND FOUNDER, TALENTED CONSULTANCY APS

Language in job adverts is least inclusive for neurodivergent people

A note on intersectionality

People can identify with multiple dimensions of diversity.

This is called intersectionality. It’s important, because it acknowledges that we need to understand how people’s identities and experiences overlap, the discrimination or prejudices they face, and how those impact their perspectives.

But often, when we consider diversity in the workplace, it’s usually from a unilateral perspective. This doesn’t always give us a full picture on how individuals who identify with multiple dimensions of diversity experience the world.

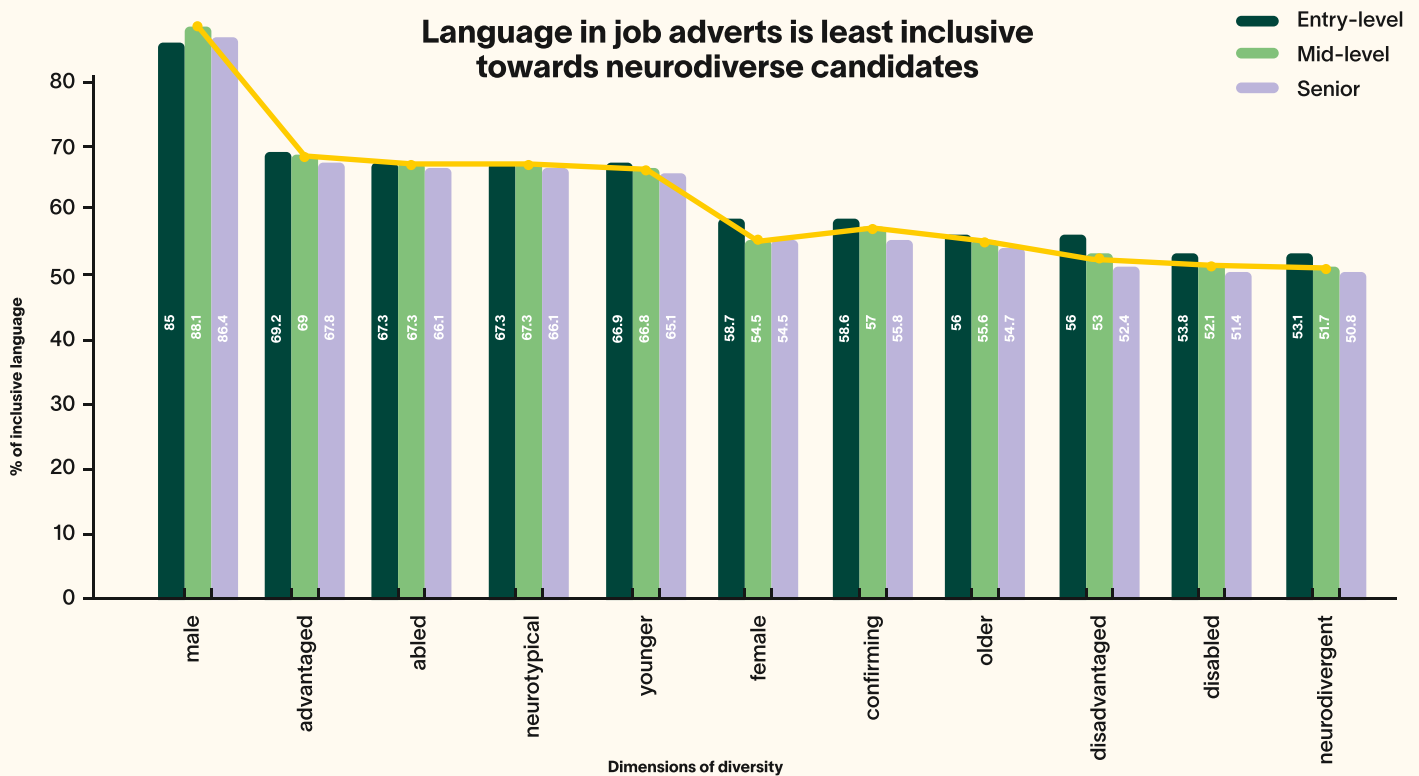
In our analysis, we’ve focused on developing understanding of candidates by one dimension of diversity to show how language impacts individual experiences.

But as you consider your own company, we encourage you to consider how intersectionality influences the experiences and perspectives of your candidates and employees.

When we analysed our data by differing dimensions of diversity, we also found that it's **least inclusive** towards neurodivergent folks.

Around **50%** of the language across all job adverts was non-inclusive towards neurodivergent candidates at all levels of seniority. People with disabilities weren't too far behind.

And that's not all — language becomes less inclusive the further we move up the seniority ladder, falling over **2%** between entry-level and senior positions.



Typical job adverts attract neurotypical candidates

Work isn't really set up to work for neurodivergent people.

We build vast, open-plan offices designed for collaboration,

where distorted voices and the constant shrill of a coffee grinder fill the whole room with noise.

We focus on the uniformity of experience, copy and pasting desks and chairs in neat rows with the view that they'll cover 'most' people's needs. And up until recently, we imposed standard hours for everyone, even though some employees weren't able to work at their best during 9-5 — let alone thrive.

These neurotypical norms have also trickled down into our hiring processes — and research backs this up. Folks on the autism spectrum **experience far more hiring bias** when they're subjected to an interview process designed for neurotypical people. A 2022 study of neurodivergent workplace experiences found that **linguistic ambiguity in the hiring process is still a key barrier**.

And every time we write a job advert, we need to understand that what we say often doesn't match up to what we mean. That ambiguity can signal an unwelcoming environment for neurodivergent folks — and that means we hire people who fall in line with expected social norms, rather than the best person for the job.

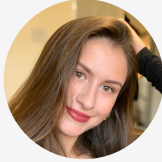
"Typical group processes are often based on neurotypical people. When organisations are looking for a candidate, they want to see common 'typical' behaviours, like good communication skills, confidence, or working memory.

This expectation tells neurodivergent people that they're being assessed by neurotypical traits.

A lot of the time, the way job adverts are written and these required characteristics make it harder for neurodivergent people to assimilate key information, because they don't know whether or not they qualify for the role.

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That means they self-select out of the process — because like any candidate, they want to feel like they have a good chance of getting an interview. This creates a huge barrier to entry.”



Emily Banks

FOUNDER AND CEO, ENNA GLOBAL

How to build an inclusive sourcing process

Often, we see organisations say that they’re struggling to attract candidates from marginalised groups — despite having made some more inclusive changes to their process. That’s because while you might have looked at the language in your advert or adjusted where you look for candidates, there are some more subtle nuances in how you run this part of the process than can unintentionally make candidates from marginalised groups feel excluded and unwelcome.

Making your sourcing process more inclusive means intentionally removing these initial barriers to access so that marginalised candidates feel welcome and supported in their application.

3 quick actions for more inclusive sourcing

- Use a tool (like us!) to enable you to identify agentic language, jargon, clichés, and stereotypes in your job adverts.
- Identify the traits essential to each role — and discard anything else.
- Anonymise resumes before candidate selection.

01: Think about the traits you're actually measuring

When you're creating a job description, your key goal is to remove as much ambiguity as you can for your candidate, and create a clear expectation of exactly what your role is, and the core skills you need to see.

This requires strong alignment across HR and hiring managers that leads to thoughtful role creation based on skills and strengths gaps, rather than the proverbial 'shopping list' of desired traits. Because when goals and outcomes don't match up internally, it'll show in how you source and advertise for a candidate.

Having clear criteria from the outset will mean you're more likely to hire according to candidate strengths, rather than biases. And when a trait or linguistic choice in your job description doesn't meet your criteria, then it's a great opportunity to consider what message it sends.

"As you write your job description, you need to consider how you're going to measure each characteristic that describes your ideal candidate for the role. Because if you can't measure it, then you need to dig deeper into why you're asking for it in the first place.

Let's say you're looking for an ambitious candidate. How do you measure ambition — what makes someone ambitious enough? Does that look the same for men and women? Does that definition change if someone shows up to an interview in a wheelchair?

Because if you're not asking those questions and your threshold of 'ambition' changes for different people, then you will automatically view some people as fulfilling that criteria, and some not."



Emil Novák-Tót

HEAD OF RESEARCH, DEVELOP DIVERSE

02: Scan for unintentional red flags

We filter everything through our own experiences — and this is never more true than for marginalised candidates who have experienced a lifetime of exclusion.

But exclusion can be subtle. It could be in the jargon in your job advert that discourages younger people from applying from the get-go, your pingpong table, a junior role with a laundry list of responsibilities, or the fact that your job mentions that the ideal candidate thrives in busy environments.

This language might be saying more than you think — and they might be excluding more candidates than you think.

“The language you use to describe both the job and the company gives people much more information than you think it does. You think you’re describing a job and the ideal candidate — but that’s not always what your candidates see.

That’s because the words you’re putting out there are part of your company vocabulary. They’re the in-jokes and team jargon, the foosball table and Friday bar.

You’re viewing these things from a place of positivity — but when you put them in your advert, they’re experienced differently by a candidate because of their own experiences. They can become red flags that tell people they’re not welcome.

For marginalised candidates, this language is a minefield of tiny yellow, orange, and red flags. They might be undetectable to others — they accumulate, and they implicitly signal exclusion.”



Emil Novák-Tót

HEAD OF RESEARCH, DEVELOP DIVERSE

To build a truly inclusive sourcing process, you need to filter and refilter your job advert through different experiences. Consider the culture your foosball table or fast-paced culture promote — and consider if that's the message you want to send.

In addition to agentic and biased language, scan your job adverts for

- **Dominant cultural references:** References to your Friday cocktail hour and your Christmas party might be non-inclusive to folks from different ethnicities or religions — as well as non-drinkers, parents or carers who are unable to attend.
- **Jargon and acronyms:** Research shows that internal vocabulary and business jargon discourages younger applicants from applying to a role.
- **Benefits that aren't really benefits:** When a candidate sees a 'great culture' and 'foosball table' among your list of benefits, it may raise questions about what you're not offering.

But remember that just switching out your language doesn't change the intention. Creating a more inclusive sourcing process isn't just about making yourself more attractive as an employer — it has to trickle into your organisation's culture and structure. Because while writing an inclusive job ad may increase your pipeline of marginalised candidates, if your culture isn't truly inclusive, then you're setting expectations as an employer that you're not delivering on.

03: Slow down your sourcing process

We keep being told that we're in a candidate-led market — and that organisations need to act quickly if they want to compete for the best talent.

This perspective isn't incorrect — but it is one-sided. Because when organisations focus purely on competing for talent, they're not giving marginalised candidates a chance to compete, full stop. They're also not giving themselves time to re-evaluate their own culture and create a better environment for present and future employees that respects the backgrounds they come from.

That's because the hiring process is based on a number of assumptions. It assumes every candidate has reliable internet access to follow up on their application in time — or that candidates know where to find your job at all. It assumes that each candidate has the ability to respond to your advert and emails quickly.

That's a lot of assumptions — and organisations getting the sourcing step right value inclusion and equity equally with diversity. They understand that recruiting more inclusively sometimes means slowing things down. And, we get it, this part can be hard — that's why whole company buy-in is required to make it work.

This means organisations might need to break up with some of their sourcing biases — like only posting their jobs through standard channels, for one. It means considering all avenues — whether that's creating a poster campaign, reconsidering 'essential' role qualifications, or creating more accessible ways for candidates to get in touch.

“Rapid recruitment cuts off many marginalised communities. Neurodiverse candidates may want to spend longer on a CV or application form. Working parents are already juggling significant time commitments.

Candidates from a lower socioeconomic background may have less frequent access to technology, meaning they may be unaware of vacancies or are less familiar with what we consider essential platforms, so they never have the opportunity to apply.

The application is the first part of the process, but not everyone is starting that process from the same place. It’s important to modify these very early stages of contact to allow for this — otherwise, the rest of the process and best intentions around inclusivity are futile.

Slowing down the process gives more time for a range of different people to consider and apply for the role — and a lengthier process allows the business longer to assess a candidate’s suitability beyond their CV.”



Caroline Fox

GLOBAL EDI LEAD, TENTH REVOLUTION GROUP

Putting interviews and assessments in the hot seat

“We’re conditioned to think that the interview process needs to be a formal conversation, and that candidates have to dress and act a particular way. But what if we challenge that cookie cutter narrative?”



Dr. Poornima Luthra

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL,
CEO AND FOUNDER, TALENTED CONSULTANCY APS

We often say that in the interview, the candidate is interviewing the organisation as much as the organisation is interviewing them.

And from a theoretical standpoint, that analogy works as long as your process is balanced for each candidate. But in reality, we’re missing that huge, glaring employer-candidate power dynamic that forces candidates to act, speak and dress in a professionally ‘acceptable’ way in order to win a role.

We force people into suits, perch them on uncomfortable chairs, and put them in a high-stress scenario where we fire questions at them and ask them to demonstrate their knowledge and experience in an hour or less.

It’s enough to make even the calmest person’s palms sweaty — but it can be especially challenging for marginalised candidates.

Candidates on the autism spectrum, for example, are often perceived less favourably in the interview environment. Black women with a natural hairstyle **are perceived as unprofessional** in a job interview setting. **Gay and lesbian candidates** are less likely to be offered an interview than heterosexual candidates.

Research shows that when we're anxious in an interview setting, it has a **negative impact on our performance**. And when you couple that with the structural discrimination inherent in the interview process, it's easy to see how a marginalised candidate's experience of an interview might be a little different than that of a white male candidate.

A non-inclusive interview process might include

- A homogeneous interview panel.
- Introducing yourself without specifying your pronouns.
- An unstructured process where each candidate is evaluated based on different questions.
- Setting an unexpected task that a candidate wasn't informed about beforehand.

How to build inclusive interview and assessment processes

Building a more inclusive interview and assessment process isn't just better for marginalised candidates — it's better for everyone. That's because when you remove as much anxiety as you can from a highly stressful process, your candidates will feel more confident to show up as themselves.

Organisations can foster greater inclusion at the interview and assessment stage by adding structure, standardisation and training to interview technique. But with a little re-engineering, they also have the opportunity to flip the script, and play with format and environment to cultivate the best environments for great conversations.

3 quick actions for more inclusive sourcing

- Introduce yourself to the candidate along with your pronouns.
- Provide candidates with a full agenda on what to expect for their interview, including dress code, directions to the office, and what to do when they arrive if the interview takes place at your workplace.
- Audit your assessments by giving them to a team member, and timing how long they take to complete.

01: Structure and standardise your interview process

Organisations can ensure greater inclusion at the interview and assessment stage by adding structure, standardisation and training to interview technique.

But these processes only work if they're fair — and if every candidate is evaluated by the same criteria.

Because if you're asking an older candidate about their technological knowledge, but you're not extending the same question to a younger candidate with prior experience in tech, then your process is already biased.

Research shows that when hiring managers and interviewers aren't trained in interview technique, they're far more likely to develop a biased process due to **overconfidence in their ability to find the best candidate**.

Meanwhile candidates are more likely to feel that they're being evaluated fairly if an interviewer sticks to a **structured interview process**. And interviewers are far more likely to run a structured process if they receive the right training to do so.

Interview training isn't really about unconscious bias training — it's more about empowering your team members to build structured, standardised processes that mean each candidate is evaluated by the same criteria. This includes giving them training in how to ask competency-based questions, how to score candidates fairly, and making sure that everyone stays aligned to the same process.

But you should also train interviewers in how to create a more welcoming environment for everyone — as Kathrine Benzon, Talent Acquisition Partner at Maersk Tankers, explains.

“To avoid beauty bias in hiring decisions, we made some conscious changes to our hiring process.

This is why first interviews are now always done by telephone by the hiring manager — no cameras are involved in this initial stage of the process. Managers can objectively assess the candidate’s motivation and capabilities without bias coming into the equation, while still creating a welcoming environment for candidates.

At the second interview, we make sure it’s a joint process. We use the same questions for every candidate to ensure consistency, so that we know we’re always assessing candidates in a structured way.”



Kathrine Benzon

TALENT ACQUISITION PARTNER,
MAERSK TANKERS

02: Identify inclusion gaps in your assessments

Skills-based assessments may seem like you’re levelling the playing field for your candidates. They provide proof of skills, while holding each candidate to the same evaluation criteria, meaning you’re less likely to succumb to bias — right?

Not exactly. The problem with most interview assessments is that they have a limited perspective. They prioritise **cognitive ability and intelligence** over on-the-job learning and candidate potential. But they’re *not* designed to account for the whole human at the centre of the process.

In simpler terms, interview assessments are so focused on creating an equal experience that they fail to be equitable. They're designed based on an assumption that every candidate has the same amount of time, knowledge, and needs.

But what your candidates rarely tell you is how your assessments impact them behind the scenes.

- A working parent coming through your hiring pipeline might not share that their child got sick this week, meaning they had limited time to focus on your assessment, causing them to self-select out of your process.
- A neurodivergent technical candidate might not feel comfortable telling you that they struggled with your pair programming exercise, because it focused heavily on demonstrating collaboration skills in a high-stress scenario.
- A younger candidate new to the workforce may feel discouraged by a long, complex assessment that assumes a certain level of experience or knowledge.

Assessing candidates more inclusively means being cognisant of how your assessment process may impact different types of candidate, and being willing to change things up when they don't meet candidate needs.

03: Reconsider what ‘interview’ means to you

When we picture a job interview, most of us get a specific image in mind. We picture wearing a suit or smart clothes, perching nervously on a chair in a meeting room. We picture someone seated at a table, fielding questions from three people on the other side. We might even feel the jolt of anxiety.

But just because it’s the way most organisations standardise their interview process, it doesn’t mean that it’s the most inclusive. That’s because when candidates come into the interview room feeling uncomfortable from the get-go, then it’s not going to be the best predictor of their performance as an employee.

And when we realise that the interview can present a challenge for marginalised candidates, it no longer makes sense to always hold interviews the same way we always have done — especially if we can choose a new approach that identifies a great candidate while increasing a sense of inclusion.

“We’re conditioned to think that the interview process needs to be a formal conversation, and that candidates have to dress and act a particular way. But what if we challenge that cookie cutter narrative?”

What if we try harder to see how people are in more natural scenarios, than in a high-stress environment where you’re expected to act in a professional way? What if you created an interview where neurodivergent folks played with Lego, so they didn’t feel pressured to maintain eye contact at all times? What if we told women in leadership roles to forgo the pantsuit?

Organisations can create a more inclusive interview environment and still get the same — if not better — results.”



Dr. Poornima Luthra

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL,
CEO AND FOUNDER, TALENTED CONSULTANCY APS

Understanding the marginalised candidate experience

“The hiring process is not a secret society, and it’s your job as a company to tell people how to interview with you. Your goal shouldn’t be to screen people out — it should be to screen them in.”



Sharai Johnson

DIVERSITY TALENT PROGRAM MANAGER,
TECHNOLOGY INDUSTRY

Throughout the interview process, your candidate’s purpose is to figure out if your organisation is somewhere they can envision themselves working. Yours is to make them feel respected, heard, and valued at every single stage.

That’s where candidate experience comes in.

Each interaction with your organisation gives your candidate information about the type of company they’re interviewing for.

But while your candidate experience might look good on the surface, it might not be truly inclusive. That’s because it’s likely to have been created — usually unintentionally — through the lens of a dominant cultural bias.

So how can exclusion show up in your candidate experience?

- Writing a 'laundry list' of required traits or experience.
- An application form that isn't optimised for accessibility best practices.
- Only offering a binary choice for gender identity in your application process.
- Talking over candidates during interviews, or going off-script on the questions asked.
- Giving candidates a long or complex assessment they need to perform after hours.
- Taking a long time to respond to candidate emails — or not following up at all.

If your application form isn't optimised for accessibility, you risk excluding neurodivergent folks, or people with disabilities. Offering only two gender identity choices on your form means your organisation isn't safe for transgender, nonbinary and questioning candidates. Long and complex assessments or interview tasks may mean parents and carers self-select out of your interview process because other priorities have to take precedence.

How to build an inclusive candidate experience

In the hiring process, belonging is critical. It helps your candidate envision what life is like at your company, how they'll be treated, and whether or not they'll feel safe speaking up in everyday conversations. It allows them to weigh up whether or not they'll be able to be their full selves at work.

Creating an inclusive candidate experience requires organisations to create belonging at every step of their hiring process. It means moving beyond the assumption that every candidate starts from the same place, and dismantling the employer-candidate power dynamic, giving candidates a safe space to ask questions and understand your process.

And to do that, you need to cultivate empathy and transparency.

3 quick actions for a more inclusive candidate experience

- Personalise all candidate emails — especially rejections or specific feedback.
- Ask candidates at every stage if they have questions or feedback.
- Ask a number of team members to run through your application process and note instances where things could be more inclusive — including gender options, accessibility, language used, and length of time.

01: Evaluate your process, one step at a time

When you start digging into your recruitment process from an inclusion perspective, you're very likely to find a few areas you'd like to improve right away. And while you might feel fired up to make changes, you'll need to remember these threads of marginalisation and oppression are deeply interwoven into every system and structure of our society.

It's going to take time, collective commitment, thoughtful changes to unpick those threads.

Rai advises organisations to map out their entire process from the beginning, and intentionally view each step, touchpoint, and interaction — however small — from different perspectives.

"The hiring process is not a secret society, and it's your job as a company to help people interview with you. Your goal shouldn't be to screen people out — it should be to screen them *in*.

When it's a non-inclusive experience, it communicates that you're not welcoming. It says that you're not open to anyone else that doesn't meet your specific requirements in terms of role.

When you're deconstructing a system that was created to oppress marginalised people, you need to start right from the very beginning. You need to retrace every step of your hiring process and make sure that every voice is accounted for."



Sharai Johnson

DIVERSITY TALENT PROGRAM MANAGER,
TECHNOLOGY INDUSTRY

Ask yourself questions at each touchpoint to identify how different groups of people might feel participating in your process, and the varying needs they may have. For example:

How could you make a younger person feel confident about applying to your role?

- How would a new parent or primary caregiver feel experiencing your assessment process while juggling other demands?
- What information might help folks from different socioeconomic backgrounds understand how your process works?
- How would a person with autism experience our interview format?
- Does your careers page communicate values and job perks that feel inclusive and accessible to all?

Combine this with data about your recruitment process, including:

- People most likely to apply to your roles
- Candidate drop-out rates and stages
- Offer acceptance rate among candidates from marginalised groups
- Qualitative data from candidate experience surveys
- Retrospectives on your hiring process with new employees

Use these answers, plus your data to identify the steps — or even micro-steps — where your candidate experience feels less inclusive.

02: Identify marginalised experiences

Building a more inclusive candidate experience hinges on having the data that identifies those moments of hidden bias, and guides you to making thoughtful changes to your process.

But in this case, we don't mean demographic data. Instead, we mean making an intentional effort to understand how your hiring process makes people feel, and the differing perspectives individuals bring to the hiring process based on their own experiences. Because these are where you can introduce the small, thoughtful changes that make a big difference for inclusion.

"Each candidate — each demographic — may have their own feelings and experiences about the recruiting process as a whole. To build an inclusive candidate experience, hiring managers need to start from a place of empathy and understand those experiences."



Sharai Johnson

DIVERSITY TALENT PROGRAM MANAGER,
TECHNOLOGY INDUSTRY

As a contractor at Uber, Sharai helps hiring managers connect with these experiences by organising regular meet-and-greet sessions that create a safe environment for candidates from marginalised groups to ask questions, and understand the process.

These sessions help candidates come into an interview process feeling confident, but they also aid managers to build empathy about the challenges and fears each group faces in a typical recruitment process.

03: Demystify your hiring process

Organisations often like to keep their hiring process a little opaque. Candidates aren't always given a clear sense of what's coming next, or when they can expect to hear from an organisation. It's hard to know how to prepare, or how the process works.

But here's the thing: When you leave candidates in the dark about what's coming next, it creates added fear and anxiety.

Organisations that want to build a truly inclusive candidate experience need to take meaningful steps to rebalance this power dynamic by building a transparent process, and creating opportunities for candidates to feel safe asking questions.

In practice, this means proactively sharing resources about your hiring process over email and in prepared information sheets, responding personally to individual questions and creating informal meet-and-greet groups.

In simpler terms, it's about creating the transparency that sets candidates up for success.

"There's no formal learning process to interview for a job. This is why your job as a company is to prepare your candidates for each next step — and give them the answers and resources they need to feel confident.

Some of our technical candidates from marginalised groups come through our process without the experience or exposure that hiring managers might expect to see. Having those conversations ahead of time allows us to meet folks where they're at."



Sharai Johnson

DIVERSITY TALENT PROGRAM MANAGER,
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Inclusive recruitment is everyone's business

Creating a truly inclusive framework for recruitment starts with awareness and knowledge of how structural discrimination shapes your hiring process and the decisions you make.

Because once you understand how folks feel at each stage of your hiring funnel, you'll be more able to create a process and organisation where everyone — no matter their experiences or how they identify — can belong.

This is why building a more inclusive recruitment process doesn't just come down to your recruiting team — it involves everyone at your organisation. It requires empowering people to speak up when they see issues, and encouraging uncomfortable conversations.

For that, you need to think about the people involved in your process even more than the process itself. That's why as you work through action points from this guide, you need to consider how DEI fits into your organisation as a whole, who it impacts, and who takes responsibility.

Because when *everyone* — from your senior leaders to your talent team to each individual contributor — plays their part, it creates a workplace where everyone is set up to work at their best.

"For cultural transformation to happen, the reality is that you need a critical mass of people stepping up and acting in inclusive ways.

One of the biggest gaps I think we have is that DEI strategy often doesn't support individuals in that journey.

That's why to really move the needle, organisations need to move beyond the DEI roadmap. They need to work hard to empower others in a way that is honest — and that acknowledges the difficulties and discomfort that this is not an easy journey. They need to ensure people understand what they can do individually to facilitate this change — and we're not quite there yet."



Dr. Poornima Luthra

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