RoleMapper's Guide to Breaking Bias

RM RoleMapper

Introduction

Most of us would like to think that we're not biased.
We consider ourselves to be objective, fair-minded individuals.

But the truth is that all of us are influenced by our biases - both conscious and the hidden biases that we have operating at an unconscious level that can influence the decisions we make about individuals.

There is a vast body of research that has shown how these unconscious biases result in unfair and biased hiring processes. Experts have recommended a number of strategies to reduce this in the recruitment process. However, most of these strategies focus on educating the hirer - or ways to counter bias - while 'in-the-moment' of the recruitment, be that screening or interviewing candidates.

But they miss one of the most important steps that happens at the front
of the process – how the job itself is designed.

Compelling evidence shows that by starting at the very front end of the process – how you design your jobs and create your job descriptions - can help you reduce systemic bias in the recruitment process and unlock talent and diversity in your hiring.

Most of us would like to think that we're not biased. We consider ourselves to be objective, fair-minded individuals.

Intelligent Job Design

The importance of intelligent inclusive job design

So what is intelligent inclusive job design and how does it reduce bias in recruitment? How we design our jobs impacts how attractive our roles will be to diverse audience. It impacts how we screen candidates, in or out of the recruitment process, and defines howand who we interview and ultimately hire into the business.

Inclusive job design is the process of designing a job in a way that ensures it will appeal to the widest and most diverse pool of potential job holders. It gives conscious consideration to designing the job in a way that opens it up to the widest pool of talent and removes any bias or barriers that might put off – or unfairly exclude – talented people from applying or excelling in a role.

The intelligent part is making sure you connect the dots – proactively challenge and eliminate the biases in how jobs are designed and promoted wherever this process may happen in the business: job profiling, job description creation, job advert creation, screening and interviewing.

In this guide we share insights into five ways you can use intelligent inclusive job design to break biases across your recruitment process and widen the pool of talent you recruit.

How we design our jobs impacts the end-to-end recruitment process.

Educationism Bias

Breaking the bias of educationism

One area where we see a considerable level of hidden hiring bias is level of education, or to coin the phrase created by social psychologists, "Educationism".

Researchers found clear evidence that educated people are implicitly biased against the less educated.

To explain this using the language of the 'bias-academics', we all form part of different "in-groups" - social groups to which a person psychologically identifies as being a member. Our unconscious ~~biases cause~~ us to make decisions in favour of individuals in our in-groups to the detriment of others.

Educationism can manifest itself unconsciously, and also sometimes overtly within the recruitment process. We often see managers listing a specific level of education or qualification requirements in their job descriptions, when the reality is that it's not required.

Understandably, specifying a degree can often be a comfort blanket for managers to ensure a baseline of education and knowledge, and it definitely makes the screening process easier for recruiters: if you don't have the qualification, you don't make the short-list.

A degree requirement is not a good indicator of candidate ability. But is a degree qualification really an indicator of a candidate's ability to perform well in the role? Not according to Google.

"Numbers and grades alone did not prove to spell success at Google and are no longer used as hiring criteria"

Prasad Setty, VP,
people analytics, google

"For years, candidates were screened according to SAT scores and college grade-point averages, metrics favored by its founders".

Prasad Setty, VP People Analytics,Google

But, after extensive analysis into high performance and retention, they found that "numbers and grades alone did not prove to spell success at Google and are no longer used as important hiring criteria"

Further research backs up Google's conclusion. A recent study into employers who switched to hiring university educated graduates over previously hired high-school grads, found no improvement in the quality of work, performance, productivity or revenue with the upgrade in education level.

Educationalism screens out potential high-performing candidates

There are undoubtedly roles where qualifications are essential. But there is a strong argument that says a degree should only really be a requirement for a specialised position, like a doctor or lawyer or for specialist subjects where in-depth knowledge is required that can only be gained through study or extensive training.

By specifying requirements for a specific degree, where none is necessary, you are baking bias into the process and blocking prospective high-potential candidates. You just need to look at the stats to understand the impact this might have.

In the US, 34% of the population has a Bachelors degree, less than the UK (27%). So, if you are specifying the requirement for a degree and screening on this in your recruitment process, then you are actively EXCLUDING over 66% of the population. Such as individuals who did not have the opportunity go to university - or who chose not to – but who might have worked their way up the career ladder and be perfect for the role.

"My best software developers do not have a degree in computer science, one has an Arts Degree and the other a Degree in Ceramics" (RoleMapper User)

Create Consistent, Inclusive Job Descriptions

Imagine if you overlay this with a request for a specific degree like computer science, where only 18% are STEM majors. You've missed out on that talented software engineer who took a circuitous route after studying Arts or Ceramics.

In the US, only 13% have a masters qualification. If you are asking for a Masters, that's 87% excluded from your shortlist. It's often done without thinking, "this is what we've always asked for". It stems from an inherent bias towards qualifications.

The education landscape is changing. Recently there has been a big push towards apprentice schemes and encouraging people to head straight into work and gain experience from the ground up. Going forward, post–COVID, we may see a decline in university attendance with candidates preferring to head straight into the workplace. So, the concept of Educationism bias in your recruitment process will only have an increased impact on your ability to attract talent.

Break Educationalism bias with intelligent job design

In summary, degree and technical qualifications may be appropriate requirements for some roles but for the majority they are not. If you are posting positions that require a degree where it is not absolutely essential, it may well be costing you the best, most creative and diverse people in the market.

How do you make a shift and eliminate these biases? You need to go back to where you define these requirements in the first place. It's when we design our jobs and create our job descriptions. By adopting an intelligent inclusive job design approach you can challenge the requirement for a degree or specific qualifications.

Wherever this process may happen in the business – job profiling, job description creation, job advert creation, screening and interviewing – you ensure only the essential criteria required to perform well in the role are promoted, screened and hired.

A RoleMapper user had a 'bias-flag' on a job description for a customer support engineer that had a requirement for a Masters in Computer Science. A Masters? To do a support role? Really…?

Technical Bias

Break bias towards technical skills

Managers and recruiters default towards technical skills. When Managers are asked: "what screening criteria is important for this role?" they, more often than not, do a quick shortcut and tend to emphasise the "technical skills" required in the role.

Technical skills give a level of control for managers and recruiters to screen candidates in or out of the process. They actually make the job of screening candidates a lot easier. But by focusing on pure technical skills we are baking bias into the process and possibly missing out on talent.

Focusing on technical skills favours men over women. LinkedIn found that Men, on average, tend to list three more skills on their LinkedIn profiles than women, and are more likely to list the "in-demand" skills on their profile than women.

The research found that, women are more likely to actively showcase their soft skills on their LinkedIn profile, whereas men tend to showcase their tech skills. And given that people with 5+ skills on their LinkedIn profile are messaged up to 31x more by hirers, it's no wonder why more men are identified for shortlists than women.

Women favour job adverts that emphasize soft skills

In general women favour job adverts that bring out the soft skills requirements in a role such as team-work, collaboration, communications. Whereas many technical roles only emphasis the technical aspects of the role.

92% of hiring managers say soft skills are more important than hard skills. But when Managers are asked the question: "what does high performance look like in this role? What does good look like?" more often that not Managers tend to emphasise the soft-skills.

Break bias towards soft skills

In fact, the reality is that soft skills are often more important than technical skills with 92% of hiring managers stating soft skills are more important than hard skills. But when pressed for time and to help shortcut the process, that technical bias kicks in and managers resort back to focusing on the technical skills on their job description.
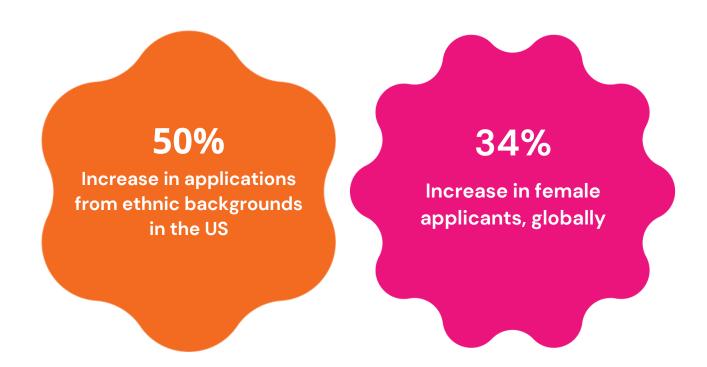
Break technical bias with intelligent job design

In summary, technical skills may well be essential requirements for role but it's the soft skills that will determine high performance and attract a wider pool of diverse talent.

So how do we make a shift in these biases? We need to look at where we define these technical and soft skills requirements in the first place. It's when we design our jobs and create our job descriptions. By adopting an intelligent job design approach you can challenge the essential skills requirements.

Wherever this process may happen in the business – job profiling, job description creation, job advert creation, screening and interviewing – you can ensure a good balance of technical and soft skills are designed, promoted, screened and hired for.

RoleMapper helps organisations increase diverse job applications

50%
Increase in applications from ethnic backgrounds in the US

34%
Increase in female applicants, globally

Interview Bias

Breaking bias in interviewing

The interview process, if not managed correctly, leaves you wide open to biases that impact how you conduct the interview and the hiring decisions you make.

In the world of bias-academia, the "Halo or Horns" effect is a terms often used to describe specifically how "confirmatory bias" can manifest itself in the recruitment process - when an interviewer allows one strong point about the candidate to overshadow or have an effect on everything else.

For instance, knowing they used to work at a particular company might be looked upon favourably. Everything the applicant says during the interview is seen in this light: "well, she left out an important part of the answer to that question, but, she must know it, she used to work at X company".

The "horns" effect is just the opposite - allowing one weak point to influence everything else. And then there is the "mini-me" bias, where we have an unconscious tendency to favour those who remind us of ourselves. This can result in managers favouring a candidate because they are similar to themselves rather than because they are the best person for the job.

Structured interviews help de-bias decision making

So how do you stop this happening? Bias training? Yes, good idea, it at least makes you aware. But training alone will not make a systemic shift - it is very difficult to be consciously conscious of our unconscious biases every single minute of the interview.

There has been lots of research into interviewing and in particular what types of interview best reduce bias. Structured interviews have been found to be considerably more effective than unstructured interviews.

Clarity on requirements is key to a good interview

The key to structured interviewing is having clarity on what you are assessing – the requirements - and ensuring the criteria you are assessing for are inclusive and have been reviewed for bias.

Ultimately, to ensure your structured interview is inclusive you only want to be assessing the absolute essential criteria required to perform well in the job, desirable criteria are not discussed.

Break interviewer bias with intelligent job design

In summary, without a structured interview process, managers may well fall foul to their unconscious biases in their interpretation, assessment and selection of talent. But if the requirements you are assessing have not been rigorously assessed for bias, or potential to exclude talent, then all your efforts may well be in vain.

The biases unconsciously baked into the job requirements in your job descriptions could potentially be helping you to screen out the best, most creative and diverse people in the market.

So, how do you ensure requirements are inclusive? At the point when we define these requirements. It's when we design our jobs and create our job descriptions. It is the process of designing a job and creating a job description where you determine the screening and assessment criteria for prospective candidates.

By adopting an intelligent job design approach you connect the dots with your inclusive job description, your inclusive requirements and your inclusive structured interview process. At the point of when you are creating your jobs – whether for job profiling, job description creation, job advert creation – you design your requirements inclusively and ensure that they feed into a structured interview, closing the loop and debiasing the process.

"Structured interviews are one of the best tools we have to identify the strongest job candidates."

Dr Melissa Harrell, People Analytics Team, Google.

Flex Work Bias

Flex working is key to attracting & retaining talent and diversity

For some time now, the ability to work flexibly has been the #1 benefit for talent seeking a new employer.

Now post pandemic, flexible working has become more of a necessity than a nice-to-have, with 60% of employees saying they would like to increase their flexibility post-lockdown.

- 80% workers would turn down a job that didn't offer flexible working
- 50% state that flexible working is more attractive than a 10% salary increase
- 81% looking for the offer of home working when choosing an employer
- 60% of fathers would prefer to work part-time and 65% of maternity returners seek part-time

In terms of impact, our own studies with organisations using the RoleMapper platform, has found that jobs designed and promoted with flexibility generate a 125% increase in female candidates and an by 80% increase in quality of hiring (based on the CV- to-hire ratio). For some organisations, flexible job design has helped increase the number of women in senior roles by 30% and reduced employee turnover 80%+.

Biases impact consideration for increased flex

Despite all of this, many organisations still face an uphill battle to shift managers towards increased workforce flex due to a number of biases at play.

In social psychology, the "status quo" bias is one type of cognitive bias that involves people preferring that things stay as they are. When it comes to considering increased flex in the way jobs could work, managers often prefer to opt for the status quo – the full-time, traditional office-based work.

Design Flex into Jobs & Teams

Any change to this can be a scary concept, especially when the operational stakes to deliver on objectives are high. So for many, they tend to prefer that things simply stay the way they are and are reluctant to explore alternatives or think laterally about how things could change. It's an emotional preference for the current situation.

Layer this with frequent "stereotype" bias and increased flexibility is often discounted. A stereotype is a thought that you might have about a specific group of individuals or certain ways of doing things – so in this case, flexible workers or flexible work.

Researchers have found that many managers perceive people working in, or seeking flexible work schedules, are less productive or less committed. Even those in organisations with cutting-edge flexible work-option policies in place, demonstrate an overwhelmingly unfavourable disposition towards those who work or want to work flexibly.

Lack of structured flex assessment skews roles towards full-time Flexibility means different things to different people – you will have people who want to flex where they work, some who want to flex the times in the day they work, and those who want to flex the amount of time they commit to working during the day or week.

But how do you know what will work? Just saying "we are open to flexible working" is not enough, you may well be left with very disappointed candidates if the reality is that it is not feasible. More often than not, hiring managers openness to flexible working is ad hoc and left to personal preference and bias.

Not all flexible working options work for all roles. Organisations need to be ready to respond to varying requests and know what flex is feasible for each role.

Design Flex into Jobs & Teams

Break flex bias with intelligent job design

Without a structured, fair, unbiased assessment of the flex work options, managers may well resort to their stereotypes and status quo's. Resulting in jobs designed for the full-time, office-based job seekers.

So how do you review what flex work options are feasible? It is the design of the job that determines what flexible working patterns will work for specific roles. It's at the point of designing your jobs and creating your job descriptions that you are able to understand how jobs work and what flexibility could work for each role.

By adopting an intelligent job design approach, you assess the 'nature of the job' for every role to determine what flex will work. Wherever you are creating or reviewing your jobs – job profiling, job description creation, job advert creation – an intelligent job design approach connects the dots and ensures the flex working assessment is conducted and clarity is gained on flex options that can be promoted.

"RoleMapper has helped us shift mindsets around designing jobs inclusively and flexible working"

Writing Bias

Breaking Bias in what you write

Language and copy, as a standalone element, is commonly seen as the key to unlocking diversity and inclusion; but at RoleMapper we know that – although extremely important – it is only one small part of the whole solution. But nevertheless, it is definitely still important.

The average user reads, at most, 20% of what's on a page. (Jakob Nielsen)

Usability expert Jakob Nielsen tells us that over 80% of people skim read – they tend to scan not read content – and read at most 20% of what's on a page. When you write more, people understand less. Writing guru Ann Wylie's research that shows when average sentence length is 14 words, readers understand more than 90% of what they're reading. At 43 words, comprehension drops to less than 10%.

When you write more, people understand less

Research by the USA Press Association found that the longer the sentence, the greater the strain. Readers find sentences of 8 words or less very easy to read; More than 25 words are very difficult to read – just not "accessible" to readers. So, between 14 and 17 words is the sweet spot.

Short vs long sentence structure

Average sentence length (words)	Description of style
29 or more	Very difficult
25	Difficult
21	Fairly difficult
17	Standard
14	Fairly Easy
11	Easy
8 or less	Very easy

Keep sentences to 17 words max

Writing Bias

Long, complicated sentences force users to slow down and work harder to understand what they're reading. This isn't something people want to do, even if they're familiar with the subject or language you're using.

Jargon and complexity deters candidates from applying

There are a lot of confusing terms commonly used in job adverts. A <u>study found</u> that using jargon in adverts actually had a negative impact on the confidence of early careers applicants. It made them feel like they "don't deserve" a role or were "not good enough" to apply as they felt "intimidated" by the job descriptions or "unsure" as to what they'll be facing.

Jargon is not only stopping people applying for jobs but it also means employers are missing out on talent.

Women are less likely to apply for jobs that are stereotypically masculine. The language you use is really important

<u>Research has found</u> that there are words that are stereotypically masculine and others that are stereotypically feminine. The research goes on to conclude that men and women react at an unconscious level to masculine-coded or feminine-coded words. Gendered-themed words have the greatest effect on women - women are less likely to identify with jobs that are stereotypically masculine.

Highly masculine wording used in the job posting reduces women's appeal of the job because it signals that women do not fit or belong in that job. Masculine coded words such as 'competitiveness' or 'assertiveness' may put women off. It's subtle and subconscious but tremendously powerful.

LinkedIn research found that more definitive terms, such as 'ambitious' or 'high-pressured' were off-putting: 44% of women would even be discouraged from applying for a role if the word 'aggressive' was included in a job description – only a third of men felt the same.

Writing Bias

Break bias in your job adverts with intelligent job design

So, in summary, what you write and the way you write it has an impact on how people read, engage with and the attractiveness of the jobs you promote. Good job adverts are easy to read, with short headings, bulleted content and simple vocabulary and gender debiased language.

The challenge is that when it comes to creating job description content, in most organisations, it is all a bit back-to-front. The job gets designed and the job description created in a way that make sense to the Manager community. Then the recruitment function scramble to decipher, de- code and re-write the content to appeal to the external marketplace.

Apps are available to decode the language, but it's a bit of a back-to-front approach - addressing it from the 'outside-in' rather than the 'inside-out'. Like plastering over the cracks, putting a band-aide on the problem rather than addressing the root cause.

Don't plaster over the cracks, address the root cause

By adopting an intelligent job design approach, you can challenge the words you use and the sentences you write at the heart of where you create your jobs.

Whatever you are creating – be that job profiles, job descriptions or job adverts – with intelligent job design you connect the dots on all job documentation and ensure that all the content you write is inclusive, wherever you come into the process. This way your recruiters can spend more time recruiting and less time having to translate complex job descriptions.

"the system is brilliant...we like "simple" and this is
a really simple but effective system to use..."

RoleMapper user

Summary

Breaking bias in the way your jobs are designed and job descriptions are created is the key to unlocking talent and diversity.

Driving systemic and organisational change is more than focusing on outputs. It's about going to the heart of your jobs and designing them inclusively: giving conscious consideration to designing your jobs in a way that opens it up to the widest pool of talent and removes any bias.

Driving systemic change is about connecting the dots – proactively challenging and eliminating the biases in how jobs are designed and promoted wherever this process may happen in your organisation.

"There are Apps on the market that provide copywriting tools – but these are just putting a band-aid onto the problem. RoleMapper takes it right back and solves the root of the problem"

RoleMapper user

About RoleMapper

RoleMapper is an AI-powered job description management solution, built with inclusion at the core

Our proprietary AI and advanced Natural Language Processing can transform your existing job titles and/or job data into a robust, future-focused job architecture, job family frame-work and job titling framework.

Our platform eliminates the cost and time burden on Reward and HR teams when creating a job architecture and job family framework to review within the business, as well as providing an accurate representation of the organisation for various strategic business and people initiatives.

As part of RoleMapper's AI-enabled service offerings, our in-house subject matter experts can transform your organisation's job data into a modern, standardised and fit-for-purpose job family framework.

Using RoleMapper's AI, our team of experts will:
• Consolidate your job title data & job content from various sources
• Identify similarities, gaps and duplicates to recommend a new job titling framework
• Harmonise & automate the creation and design of job families

Build a standardised, modern job architecture to best suit your organisational structure

For more information on our product and service offerings, talk to one of the team at RoleMapper or sign up for one of our _upcoming demos_.

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