

Advice for Minimizing the Influence of Bias and Assumptions in Searches

Source: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Women in Science and Engineering Leadership Institute (2006).

Reviewing Applicants: *Research on Bias and Assumptions*. Retrieved March 2, 2009, from: <http://wiseli.engr.wisc.edu/initiatives/hiring/Bias.pdf>

- 1) **Strive to increase the representation of women and minorities in your applicant pool.**
 - Research shows that gender assumptions are more likely to negatively influence evaluation of women when they represent a small proportion (less than 25%) of the pool of candidates (Heilman, 1980).
- 2) **Learn about and discuss research on biases and assumptions and consciously strive to minimize their influence on your evaluation.**
 - Experimental studies show that greater awareness of discrepancies between the ideals of impartiality and actual performance, together with strong internal motivations to respond without prejudice, effectively reduces prejudicial behavior (Devine et al, 2002).
- 3) **Develop evaluation criteria prior to evaluating candidates and apply them consistently to all applicants.**
 - Research shows that different standards may be used to evaluate male and female applicants and that when criteria are not clearly articulated before reviewing candidates evaluators may shift or emphasize criteria that favor candidates from well-represented demographic groups (Biernat and Fuegen, 2001; Uhlmann and Cohen, 2005).
- 4) **Spend sufficient time (at least 20 minutes) evaluating each applicant.**
 - Evaluators who were busy, distracted by other tasks, and under time pressure gave women lower ratings than men for the same written evaluation of job performance. Sex bias decreased when they were able to give all their time and attention to their judgments, which rarely occurs in actual work settings (Martell, 1991).
- 5) **Evaluate each candidate's entire application; don't depend too heavily on only one element such as the letters of recommendation, or the prestige of the degree-granting institution or post-doctoral program.**
 - Recall the study showing significant patterns of difference in letters of recommendation for male and female applicants (Trix and Psenka, 2003).
- 6) **Be able to defend every decision for eliminating or advancing a candidate.**
 - Research shows that holding evaluators to high standards of accountability for the fairness of their evaluation reduces the influence of bias and assumptions (Foschi, 1996).
- 7) **Periodically evaluate your judgments, determine whether qualified women and underrepresented minorities are included in your pool, and consider whether evaluation biases and assumptions are influencing your decisions by asking yourself the following questions:**
 - Are women and minority candidates subject to different expectations in areas such as numbers of publications, name recognition, or personal acquaintance with a committee member? (*Recall the example of the Swedish Medical Research Council.*)
 - Are candidates from institutions other than the major research universities that have trained most of our faculty being under-valued? (*Qualified candidates from institutions such as historically black universities, four-year colleges, government, or industry, might offer innovative, diverse, and valuable perspectives on research and teaching.*)
 - Have the accomplishments, ideas, and findings of women or minority candidates been undervalued or unfairly attributed to a research director or collaborators despite contrary evidence in publications or letters of reference? (*Recall the biases seen in evaluations of written descriptions of job performance.*)
 - Is the ability of women or minorities to run a research group, raise funds, and supervise students and staff of different gender or ethnicity being underestimated? (*Recall social assumptions about leadership abilities.*)
 - Are assumptions about possible family responsibilities and their effect on a candidate's career path negatively influencing evaluation of a candidate's merit, despite evidence of productivity? (*Recall studies of the influence of generalizations on evaluation.*)
 - Are negative assumptions about whether women or minority candidates will "fit in" to the existing environment influencing evaluation? (*Recall students' choice of counselor.*)

For more information:

Office of the Provost – The University of Iowa
111 Jessup Hall, Iowa City, Iowa 52242-1316
Phone: 319.335.3565 or email: provost@uiowa.edu