

Attracting top talent is critical to an organization's ability to innovate and deliver results. Due to time pressures, however, managers are often faced with making quick hiring decisions without the tools to implement the upfront planning—and alignment with the team—necessary to lead to the selection of the right talent. This toolkit is designed to facilitate that planning in order to block bias and empower hiring managers, recruiters and interviewers to identify the best talent for the job.

Why does planning matter? Research shows that stereotypes can introduce biases into the candidate evaluation process, producing a higher bar of evaluation for some people and more lenient criteria for others—despite the same qualifications and level of accomplishment of the candidates. Why? When a hiring manager makes a quick assessment of a candidate's abilities, s/he may rely on stereotypes, or generalized beliefs about categories of people, as a shortcut. This introduces bias into the evaluation and has been shown to result in the hiring of less qualified talent. Planning and a clear process can help block the effects of bias.

## LEARNING GOALS

- Learn how to sharpen your use of criteria for better decision-making about talent.
- Learn how to identify and remove language (e.g., descriptions, insider terms, adjectives) based on implicit, and often inaccurate, assumptions about people.

## CRITERIA

Everyone uses criteria to evaluate talent. Criteria are the explicit or implicit benchmarks used in assessment. To limit the impact of bias, ensure that criteria: (a) are defined in advance, (b) are clear and measurable, (c) reflect the full range of leadership behaviors and competencies that the organization aspires to and d) give all potential applicants a fair chance of succeeding. Refining and aligning around criteria at each step will strengthen the entire hiring process:

- **Job descriptions:** Focus on the top criteria, not a laundry list, to ensure qualified candidates can more successfully match their skills to your job.
- **Interviews:** Provide all interviewers with a consistent approach.
- **Round ups:** Allow a productive conversation to calibrate feedback and block bias.

✓ **Focus Primarily on Top Criteria:** Many job descriptions list a dozen or more educational and experience requirements; this creates problems for the applicant and the hiring manager. No candidate can reasonably fit so many requirements nor can an interview team recall all of them when making a decision. Further, too many criteria can unnecessarily narrow the pool of talent and thus reinforce the tendency to hire those who are like oneself. A laundry list of requirements, especially one that mirrors a manager's own background, may inadvertently deter well-qualified candidates with non-traditional experience from applying. Instead of a long, unfocused list, determine the 3–5 most important criteria. Identifying a few top criteria allows everybody in the process—from recruiters to interviewers—to focus on what is most important for job success.

✓ **Redefine Criteria:** Some criteria unnecessarily weed out a large number of well-qualified candidates without resulting in a better talent pool. For example, requiring that candidates have open-source experience may inadvertently bring bias into the selection process, since open source can be an unwelcoming environment for women. In this way, requiring or preferring open-source experience may unnecessarily exclude a disproportionate number of women candidates. Instead, redefine the criteria by asking: "What other criteria may show experience relevant to community building and technical ability?"

✓ **Define Criteria Scales:** Even when a manager thinks the team knows what constitutes a well-qualified candidate, s/he may discover that team members have different ideas about what "excellent," "good," and "insufficient" looks like for each of the criteria. To help minimize bias, hold a quick conversation before the beginning the interviews about how the interviewers should evaluate competency and expertise of the candidates.

✓ **Balance Criteria:** Many organizations aspire to uphold a broad range of leadership values. While an organization may value multiple behaviors and competencies, people in the hiring process may unconsciously value just a few. Sometimes, for example, a job description may feature more assertive skills like "pushes limits" while leaving out collaborative behaviors like "works effectively on a cross-functional team." Check job descriptions, interview questions and feedback to ensure the full range of criteria are represented and evaluated by all decision makers.

✓ **Show Growth Mindset:** Criteria are often described in fixed ways, which may inadvertently deter qualified candidates, especially those with non-traditional experience. Fixed criteria include experiences and credentials that very few people have. Instead, demonstrate that your organization is willing to listen to a broad range of experiences showing abilities in a given area. One successful job description added, "You should apply even if you don't feel

that your credentials are a 100 percent match with the position description. The project is looking for relevant skills and experience, not a checklist that exactly matches the position itself.” Find ways to demonstrate that your organization hires great candidates and helps them grow once on the job. Foster openness and demonstrate that your organization values the willingness to learn and grow.

**LANGUAGE**

Good hiring materials and processes must block the automatic use of language that may contain stereotypical terms, descriptions or even verbs. Ensure that written materials strategically use balanced language and a wide range of examples that will appeal to the skills and interests of a diverse pool of candidates.

✓ **Monitor the Balanced Use of Agentic and Communal Language:** An organization’s leadership values can span a range of characteristics. One way to determine if the sourcing materials value and represent the full range of leadership values is to look at the use of both agentic and communal language. Agentic terms are those that show agency such as “driven,” “assertive” and “independent,” while communal language shows a group orientation such as “team player,” “collaborative” and “dedicated.”

✓ **Remove Red-flag Items:** Some terms can be off-putting to a candidate who does not align with industry or organization stereotypes. For example, including “ninja coder” in a job description may not appeal to a person who does not identify with the image of the geeky tech worker. Other red flags can include indicators of a culture valuing extreme work hours, exclusive or elitist language or inflexibility in how people can contribute. By choosing broadly appealing terms, you will not turn off candidates before they reach your door.



**WORKSHEET**

Try these exercises to develop more welcoming language and more focused criteria.  
Apply to job descriptions, interview questions and round ups.

**Focus On and Define Top Criteria.** What are the top three criteria for hiring? How can you define each criterion so it is clear? How can you lead conversations with the team to align around the criteria?

1. ....

2. ....

3. ....

**Redefine Criteria.** Are there any criteria that might inadvertently discourage or eliminate diverse people from applying and from being considered as top candidates? If so, can you redefine them?

Original criterion .....

What is really required for success? .....

How might you redefine the criterion? .....

**Balance Language.** Review your criteria: Did you use a balanced approach to language or did you favor either agentic or communal terms?

Agentic terms: .....

Communal terms: .....

Changes to balance: .....