



## Identifying and Avoiding Interview Biases

### Podcast Transcript

Most of us would not say we are biased. We consider ourselves to be objective fair-minded individuals. But the truth is many well intentioned individuals are often influenced by their unconscious biases. Our unconscious biases come from direct experiences we've had with people, events, and situations as well as through indirect experiences learned through stories, books, media and culture.

These hidden biases can impact us in a variety of ways, especially when it comes to interviewing and hiring. At times interviewers will make subtle assumptions about a candidate and it's these subtleties that may influence you, either positively or negatively. And, because of our biases we may make some inappropriate or even bad selection choices.

Research has shown that that many hiring decisions are made within the first five to ten minutes of an interview. These decisions are not made on whether or not the person is qualified or capable of performing the job. These decisions are made on first impressions. Referred to as social categorization, we routinely and quickly sort people into groups. The problem with this is that the categories we use to sort people are not necessarily logical, modern or at times legal.

Some common biases that may occur in an interview include, stereotyping, the halo/pitchfork effect, nonverbal bias and the "like me" syndrome. Let's explore these a bit more.

**First we have stereotyping.** This is forming an opinion about how people of a given race, gender, religion or other characteristics will think, act or respond. For example: Women with children will miss a lot of work. A veteran won't be able to adjust to working in an office. A male candidate will make a better leader than a female candidate.

Next is the **halo/pitchfork effect.** The halo effect occurs when one positive characteristic or strong point made by the candidate influences the entire interview. For instance, a candidate has a degree from a prestigious University so you think she must be highly competent and is looked upon favorably. The opposite of this is known as the pitchfork effect, when one negative characteristic or point overshadows the interview. For example, a candidate answers the first two questions of the interview poorly which leads you to believe he is not qualified for the job.

**Nonverbal bias** occurs when a positive or negative evaluation is made of someone based on their body language, personal appearance or style of dress. Examples of this may include hair length, tattoos, weight, the way someone speaks, mannerisms, or how a candidate is dressed.

Last, we have the **“like me” syndrome**. This often occurs when the candidate appears to be very similar to you in style or personality and as a result you feel they would be the best candidate for the job. We have a tendency to favor people who are similar to us. Therefore, when you are interviewing a candidate with a similar personality, style, interests or experiences you may feel like they are best candidate and base your decision on personal characteristics rather than job related criteria. The “like-me” syndrome can even extend to the same educational background or area of research.

So if we have these hidden biases, what can we do about it? The good news is there are some processes you can put in place to counteract these biases. As a first step, avoid an unstructured interview by planning in advance. You will need to understand the role you are hiring for. What technical skills or academic credentials are desired in a candidate? What qualities, skills, behaviors or experiences would the ideal candidate possess? What type of candidate would fit in your workplace culture? From there interview questions can be developed that assess if the candidate possesses these competencies.

Behavioral based interviewing will help you avoid making selections based on assumptions or intuitions or solely on credentials. Behavioral based interviewing is based on the premise that one of the best predictors of a candidate’s future job performance is his or her past job behavior. This can be explored by asking questions such as, “Describe a difficult work related problem that required you to come up with a creative solution. Tell me the steps you took and why.”, or “Please give a specific example of when you collaborated with another individual. How would you evaluate or describe the results from that effort?” By gaining insight into a candidates past experiences, you’ll develop a reliable indicator of how that individual most likely will perform in the future.

Once you’ve developed your questions ask each of the candidates the same set of questions. Asking different questions may lead to a skewed assessment of the candidate. Keep in mind that you should only ask questions that relate to the job the person is being considered for. You should not ask any questions relating to age, family, marital status, pregnancy, gender, national origin and religion.

When you’re ready to begin your interviews consider screening candidates by phone first. By conducting a telephone interview as a first step we may eliminate the first impression bias. Including others in the interview process can also help to reduce or balance your biases. By involving others you seek out different perceptions and opinions about the candidate.

And, even though we shouldn’t completely ignore our first impressions of a candidate, it shouldn’t be our only criteria. As difficult as it may be, try to suspend your judgments. Instead test your conclusions. Reference checks are a great way to do this. Perhaps a candidate arrived late to the interview and this has you concerned that tardiness will be an issue for him on the job. Reference checking can provide you with the reassurance or confirmation that it will or won’t be an issue.

A final action you can take is to learn more about your biases. The implicit association test can provide insight into your potential blindspots and help you uncover your hidden biases. For more information visit: [implicit.harvard.edu](http://implicit.harvard.edu).

Increasing your self-awareness about your hidden biases can help you reduce the likelihood that you make a hiring decision based solely on a preconceived notion about a candidate. We may never completely rid ourselves of our unconscious biases but we can work at minimizing their negative effect.

## Additional Resources

To assist you with the UF hiring process please consult the appropriate [recruitment checklist](#). These checklist serve as a tool to assist hiring managers, department administrators and search committees when recruiting candidates for positions in alignment with the UF recruitment policies and procedures along with federal guidelines and statutes.

## References

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