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Unconscious bias observer scheme

DEVELOPMENT OF A NOVEL UNCONSCIOUS BIAS OBSERVER SCHEME AT CHEMISTRY@YORK

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The Department of Chemistry at the University of York has introduced trained Unconscious Bias (UB) observers to shortlisting meetings and job interviews with the aim of reducing UB at all stages of recruitment and the promotion of good practice.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been increasing evidence for the impact of UB on recruitment and selection.^{1,2} UB training has formed an important part of York's equality and diversity strategy.

In 2014, we augmented UB training with the introduction of trained UB observers on academic shortlisting and interview panels as part of the Department of Chemistry's commitment to equality and diversity. Their role is to listen to and record the decision-making and to reflect back to the panel any instances of bias. The scheme has since been extended to cover all staff recruitment within the department and recently to other departments.

Training

Panel members asked to:

- Attend recruitment and selection training course
- Complete online UB and equality and diversity training
- Read guidance and watch video on UB in advance

Short list

- Observe shortlisting
- Provide on the spot advice and feedback

Interview

- Observe interviews
- Provide advice after interviews

Improve

- Provide written feedback and suggestions to panel
- Feedback to Equality and Diversity Group
- Recruitment practice improves

WHY HAVE AN OBSERVER?

Individuals are more likely to see bias in others than themselves.³ We believe that the presence of an UB observer might serve as a reminder to panels to slow down and question their own assumptions and prejudices:

“Being observed while shortlisting 130 candidates down to 5 had a significant impact - in particular by having it pointed out how easily implicit assumptions made by some individuals while rapidly assessing CVs could significantly sway the considered opinion of the panel. The process of being observed made me much more reflective in considering how I personally came to such decisions, and has gone on to influence my ongoing recruitment practice.” - Panel member

THE FIRST QUESTION

We supply candidates with the first interview question in advance in order to:

- Support nervous candidates (especially those returning from career break)
- Reduce the advantage that extroverts have over introverts

It is important to highlight that the question is provided to support the candidate and help them settle in. We intend to produce a bank of the most effective starter questions for panels to choose from.

REFERENCES

1. www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/employment-and-careers/staff-recruitment/unconscious-bias/
2. C. A. Moss-Racusin et al., PNAS, 2012, 109(41), 16474-16479
3. E. Pronin, D. Y. Lin, L. Ross, PERS SOC PSYCHOL B, 2012, 28(3), 369 - 381



THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR DURING SHORTLISTING:

A-Z FATIGUE: Bias becomes stronger when you are tired and/or stressed so be aware of this. Take breaks and perhaps alternate working from the top/bottom of the list.

'IMAGINARY BACK STORY': Constructing a backstory where information is lacking, such as assumptions made about a candidate's motivation for applying, "this role might just be a stop gap, they really want a postdoc..." or speculating about why a candidate has a gap in their CV.

PATRONAGE: Differences in how male and female candidates receive supportive comments from ex-supervisors during shortlisting, (sponsorship/patronage) and how these are reported at the selection panel, such comments should be discounted.

RECENT VS RELEVANT: Care must be taken to ensure criteria are essential to the role and can be justified: Does experience really need to be recent (this doesn't guarantee that it is applicable to the vacancy) or should it just be relevant (in which case it doesn't matter how long ago something was)?

"NICE TO HAVES": It is tempting to consider skills that fall outside of the candidate brief. This information should not be taken into consideration as other candidates have not had an opportunity to share their additional skills, stick to the candidate brief.

THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR DURING INTERVIEWS:

CONSISTENCY: It is critical that each candidate has the same experience. The panel may be anxious to make questions 'flow' naturally or avoid duplication/repetition but candidates should be given the opportunity to answer the same questions.

LENGTH OF TIME CANDIDATES WERE INTERVIEWED FOR: A clear schedule helps ensure each candidate gets a similar experience. Sometimes panel members do not have the confidence to indicate to a candidate when they had gone on for too long causing the interview to overrun. Make sure there is a clock visible to everyone.

INTERNAL CANDIDATE: An internal candidate might be expected to have an advantage over external candidates. However, interviews may be less formal and both parties may assume some prior knowledge. This can make it harder for candidates to answer questions fully which may disadvantage them.

IN-GROUPS AND OUT-GROUPS: We have a natural tendency to prefer people who are like us (our in-group) and may treat them more favourably. We may feel less comfortable around people who are different to us (out-group) and treat them less favourably.

CONFIRMATION BIAS: We tend to prefer information which confirms what we know and believe and are more likely to overlook information which contradicts our view.

WEIGHTING OF DIFFERENT CRITERIA: The importance attributed to different criteria in the person specification and scoring of different sections of the interview should be agreed in advance to avoid moving the goal posts.

PROS

- Improves transparency and credibility of process (especially for key roles or where internal candidates involved)
- Extended form of training, noticeable improvement in recruitment practice over time
- Provides insight into the work of colleagues and improves connections between groups

CONS

- Very time consuming (up to 1.5 days per position)
- If not handled sensitively, potential for panel or candidate to feel uncomfortable during observation