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Unconscious Bias in Job Postings: What You Don't Know Can Hurt You

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Being mindful of language choices doesn't automatically equate to being straightjacketed by political correctness. In the case of job postings, it makes good sense. Multiple studies have demonstrated that certain words carry connotations or cachets that can send an unintended and unconscious message, driving away certain candidates. A good example is "We're looking for the best of the best." Who wouldn't want the best talent? But studies have shown that some people read into that phrase a bias toward white males.

The whole topic can make people defensive. For example, a couple of the terms considered to imply male bias are "hierarchical" and "aggressive," while two that are thought to imply female bias are "adaptable" and "flexible." Speaking as a straight, white, able-bodied, middle class male, I would be dismayed to find that people thought me hierarchical and aggressive, and pleased to be considered adaptable and flexible.

However, that's not the issue here — the list of identified words is not intended to suggest that all women have these qualities and all men have an entirely different set of qualities. Similarly, the issue is not which terms prove that the user is racist or sexist or otherwise discriminatory. Nor is the issue what the user actually means by a word or phrase, however innocent the intended meaning. This issue is that making smart language choices can help you avoid driving good candidates away. Some have argued that there are upwards of 25,000 terms that can cause candidates, unconsciously, to read a bias regarding race, sex, or other demographic characteristics.

To push further into the history of this issue, in the late 1990s, a team led by social psychologist Anthony Greenwald introduced developed the Implicit Association Test (IAT). This test measures implicit, or unconscious, associations that influence responses to certain words and concepts.

In the article Measuring Individual Differences in Implicit Cognition: The Implicit Association Test, published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology in 1998, Greenwald and his co-authors describe the test and the research behind it. That article alone cites more than 25 other studies. The test has been taken more than 15 million times, and you can take it yourself at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit.

There also are companies that provide diversity awareness training, such as Prism International, FutureWork Institute and Cook Ross Inc. According to a Wall Street Journal article, companies like Microsoft, Google, Pfizer, Dow Chemical and Pricewaterhouse Coopers have provided such training for their employees.

Assuming all this convinces you, what can you do? The answer is at once simple and a bit overwhelming. You can't avoid using all 25,000 problematic terms, and none of the companies offering training or tools suggest that you should. You just need to make sure that problematic terms are balanced with inclusive terms.

Let's say you are creating a posting for an open Director of Financial Planning position. You're likely to use terms like "analytical" and "decisive," which trigger, in some people, an unconscious perception that your company is looking for a male. If you also use words like "responsible" and "dependable," which trigger an unconscious association with females, you've helped balance the posting. And, in fact, you probably *want* an analytical and decisive Director of Financial Planning who is also responsible and dependable.

What strikes me as overwhelming is knowing which words are problematic and which are inclusive. Even if one could find that list of 25,000 terms, it would be unwieldy. However, being aware of the issue is the first step.