

Using a Research Approach in Human Resources

Report Title: Bias and how it impacts fair recruitment and selection.

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Date: 05/02/2019

Word count 2438

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Executive summary

This report identifies the ways in which the recruitment and selection process is open to bias and how this can impact on women specifically. The report is aimed at those within the business who deal with recruitment and selection as it gives an overview of the issues involved.

The methods of analysis included a literature review and also the undertaking of primary research. This was done via a semi-structured interview with business partners at Chwarae Teg. The results of the data showed that unconscious bias was prevalent in the recruitment and selection procedures used by small businesses in south Wales. However, care must be taken as this was a small sample and results should not be extrapolated to make assumptions about wider business practices.

It is recommended that:

- Job analysis - HR professionals and managers should be much more aware of organisation fit as well as person–job fit. The values of the team and organisations should be assessed as well as qualifications and experience.
- Attracting applicants - a review of the actual job advert should be undertaken. This specifically means looking at imagery, language and hidden meaning in the wording.
- Application process - Should be modified; even to go as far as removing CVs and creating bespoke application forms that are scored to allow for a degree of transparency.
- Selection techniques - especially interviews could be a lot more open to scrutiny. The same questions should be asked to each candidate, with interviews again scored. Questions should also reflect person-job fit.

Whilst recruitment is a complex area, potentially riddled with bias and with few opportunities to quickly see the impact of poor decisions, it is one component of a much broader problem of limited opportunities for women in the workplace.

Further research into bias and the recruitment and progression of women can only help organisations hire the people they really need, but also show that HR is a progressive, behavioural and data led business function.

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Bias and how it impacts fair recruitment and selection.

1. Introduction (terms of reference)

Creating a diverse workforce is a critical strategic HR issue (Thomas & Ely, 1996). With organisations pushing to increase their representation of women and BAME, inherent bias in the recruitment and selection process could stop under-represented groups from achieving their full potential. As the CIPD (2018a) affirm; “Biases and discrimination are a key issue that impede progress towards diversity and inclusion”.

In-house, recruitment must be a well thought-out strategic and operational activity, even for the smallest HR function or small business manager. Regardless of the level of resources and techniques used, the recruitment process relies on human decisions. With such a human element, recruiter’s decision-making is often prone to sloppiness and outright bias that can influence the choice of candidate; often at the exclusion of women, BAME and other protected characteristics (Beattie & Johnson, 2012).

This research will therefore seek to understand how bias (specifically unconscious bias) impacts on the recruitment and selection of women. This will prove beneficial for all HR professionals when planning a recruitment and selection strategy. Specifically within Chwarae Teg it can help the business team address issues of unfair recruitment and selection with their clients. Unconscious bias also affects other areas such as Performance Management too, so findings will be helpful in this regard.

Aim:- To critically analyse recruitment and selection strategies to examine the extent to which bias can influence the non-selection of female candidates.

Objectives: -

To critically analyse recruitment and selection strategies used to recruit a diverse (female) workforce.

To identify the factors that can lead to unfair recruitment and selection.

To make recommendations as to how bias can be eliminated from the recruitment and selection process.

2. Literature Review

In researching bias in recruitment and selection, it has come to light that there are a wide number of academic studies linked to the subject. A review of the literature reveals there is no real chronological order of the topic; rather the issue has been approached across a number of different

business sectors, business units and indeed across Countries. This section will therefore be organised by theme, based on a standard four stage recruitment process as has been proposed by Carrol et al (1999) and Taylor and Woodhams (2016), being: job analysis, attracting applicants, how they should apply, and selection techniques (interviews). Initially however, to give some background, a definition of the terms will be useful.

2.1. Definitions

As the CIPD (2018b) state, diversity is about recognising differences to drive organisational success. It is about acknowledging the benefit of having a range of perspectives in decision-making and having the workforce represent the organisation's customers.

Diversity means valuing the characteristics that make a person unique, such as age, ethnicity, gender and background.

Inequality in the workplace takes many forms. However, in terms of recruitment and selection, this report is focusing on bias. Bias is either conscious or unconscious; "Unconscious bias occurs when people favour others who look like them and/or share their values" (ACAS, 2019).

2.2. Job analysis

Recruitment, whether done internally, using existing resources or externally, aims to find the right people with the right skills (Taylor and Woodhams, 2006). With the use of job descriptions and personal specifications an organisation attempts to find the best fit between an individual's characteristics and the work environment (Kristof-Brown et al, 2005). Harris (2002) however found that in a study of university recruitment for international posts many managers already had a clear idea of who they wanted and did not stop to ask if there is anyone else. This affects the judgment of managers, who make presumptions about job-fit, basing decisions on who looks like them (affinity bias) (Herring, 2009).

2.3. Attracting applicants

The journey to attract the right candidates starts with job adverts (CIPD, 2019). Van der Brink (2001) states the need to place advertisements so that all potential candidates have the opportunity to learn about and apply for a position.

The actual wording of the advert makes a dramatic difference to which gender applies, such as listing qualifications. Mohr (2014) quoting a HP study found that women apply for positions when they meet 100% of the required qualifications, whilst men are likely to apply when they meet only 60% of those qualifications.

In the university context the research highlighted that whilst vacancies are advertised in the media, in reality the preferred candidate is already known and searching for other applicants is a 'purely cosmetic' procedure (Van der Brink, 2001). This indicates bias (whether unconscious or conscious) is at work.

2.4. Application

Once the applicants have been attracted to the position, an application process begins. Typically this involves the use of CVs or application forms, together with the subsequent in-house sifting through the applications to find the most promising applicants i.e. shortlisting (Taylor and Woodhams, 2016).

Gender bias at application stage is clear from a number of studies, specifically from Bertrand and Mullainathan (2003) who identify that “there is a lot of evidence that bias may creep into assessments of CVs”. Koch et al (2015) and Moss-Racusin (2012) also state that a stark gender disparity persists within academic science. They carried out a controlled experiment assigning professors the application form of an undergraduate which was randomly assigned either a male or female name. Despite having identical application forms female applicants were judged as less competent and less hireable than their male counterparts.

Van der Brink (2001) stresses the need for clear assessment criteria and gender-neutral assessment. In the findings there is a stark reminder of gender bias when reviewing applications. Women with equal qualifications were labelled as ‘good’, men as ‘excellent candidates’.

2.5. Interview

Taylor and Woodham (2016) believe that structured interviews should be implemented, to address the concerns about consistency in the treatment of interviewees. The view that structured interviews are a better predictor of job performance is confirmed by the Macan (2009) study that found that interviewers open themselves up to various forms of bias when they ask questions that just come to mind in the interview.

Van der Brink (2001) identified that the composition of the selection committee could affect a woman’s chance of being appointed. Interestingly a study of female academic staff by Ellemers et al (2004) found that female staff in the selection process endorsed gender stereotyping perceptions more strongly than men.

2.6. Summary

It must be noted that the main studies investigated (Van der Brink, 2001 and Moss-Racusin et al, 2012) were controlled experiments in narrow fields in the Netherlands and the US respectively. These are both academic organisations and not a representation of wider business, or those operating in the UK. However, there is evidence from these studies and from wider reading of recent literature (e.g. Rivera, 2012, Mohr, 2014) that unfair practices do exist from which lessons can be learnt.

In summary the research indicates that recruiters are open to bias throughout the process and are liable to influence recruitment decisions in ways that may not predict the performance of new employees as well as they could. Because these biases are often subconscious, it is extremely difficult for these opinions to be controlled. As Beattie & Johnson (2012) describe there is a contradiction between discrimination occurring at a subconscious level and conscious assumptions. The other issue that the research clearly raises is that we simply do not know what the other outcome would have been, if bias was reduced/eliminated from the process, i.e. what would have happened had a woman been hired, who intuition would have originally rejected?

The primary research undertaken will add to the research in a limited way and will demonstrate how the recruitment and selection practices of a small number of organisations might be contributing to unfair practices and preventing women from being employed.

3. Methodology

Consideration was given to a number of research methodologies. The methodologies took into account the timescales provided, the availability of staff to participate in giving feedback and the availability of the author to allocate time to the report in conjunction with working full time.

Whilst there is a lot of secondary data held internally within the organisation i.e. historic reports written for clients outlining the issues of unfairness in their current recruitment processes, it was felt that the collation of this data would be outside the timescales of this study. Ethical considerations were also taken into account, e.g. impact on data protection (see Appendix 1). Therefore primary data collection was considered to be the most effective way of providing insight into the issue.

A wider qualitative/quantitative method would have been preferable, but an interpretivist approach was undertaken, with a qualitative approach selected. This would allow for interviews to be conducted, to provide valuable information in the form of words and meanings (Anderson, 2016).

There are different methods for data collection available, including focus groups, questionnaires and participant observation. However, due to the constraints mentioned, semi-structured interviews were chosen; i.e. the topic was discussed following a few set questions, which then allowed for a discursive flow of information (Horn, 2012). In doing so issues such as reliability (are results consistent and are they representative of wider HR practices?) and validity were considered.

Out of the eight business partners employed at Chwarae Teg, a sample of four were used. The sample was representative of the department, however, due to circumstances outside the control of the researcher, north Wales representatives were not included.

Interviews were held with each business partner to elicit their views on the recruitment practices of their clients (businesses located in Wales with between 10-250 employees). Each partner was asked the same questions, with time at the end for an open discussion. It was hoped that these discussions would highlight the recruitment processes observed, and the specific HR practices that have been put in place/suggested to overcome the issue of unconscious bias. Anonymous quotes from the organisation were also encouraged.

Data was analysed by reviewing the brief, written notes of the interviews, searching for repeated key terms, phrases and themes. This would enable generalised conclusions to be drawn.

4. Findings/discussion

Question 1. When looking at a business's recruitment practices, have you come across issues of potential bias?

Yes	No
0%	100%

All four of the business partners identified what they saw as bias within the recruitment processes of

the clients they work with. Further questions went on to explore specific examples of what they regard as bias in the recruitment process.

Question 2. In what part of the recruitment process was this?

Job analysis	10%
Advertising of roles	75%
The application process	75%
Interviews	25%

In response to this question the highest responses were to bias being seen in the advertising of roles and during the application process.

Question 3. Can you give some more information on what you found?

Responses here varied between the respondents. In the advertising of roles feedback was given that said: "I've seen adverts that are visually very masculine with pictures of men in hard hats, operating machinery, which can be off-putting to female applicants". Another commented: "If she can't see it, she can't be it", which follows a similar theme. "Language is massive" one interviewee said; "It can either be simple things like advertising a salesman's role...that word in itself shows bias at work". "Adding flexible working hours to the job ad and a highlighting a flexible working culture makes a huge difference" another commented.

The application process itself also drew comment. Of the three people that said they had come across bias, it was specifically in relation to the use of CVs. This ties in with the findings in the Moss-Racusin (2012) study. It was judged that many employees continue to recruit purely on the lines of qualifications and more specifically on industry experience; with less thought given to best-fit in terms of fitting into the team and more generalised people skills.

5. Conclusions

Whilst the findings cannot be seen as statistically relevant or be extrapolated to give wider evidence of unconscious bias in businesses in south Wales they do offer some interesting thoughts on what bias exists in the recruitment process. The main point coming from the interviews from colleagues was that businesses were 'unaware' that they could be putting up barriers to the recruitment of women and that they didn't realise that 'doing what they had always done' was in anyway unfair. A clear case of mind-sets needing to be changed.

6. Recommendations for change

With a lot of recruitment judgement placed on hunches, gut-feel and first-impressions, undoubtedly the recruitment process will incur unconscious bias. The Business Team at Chwarae Teg are aware of this, but the literature review highlights and re-affirms that robust systems need to be in place at each of the stages of recruitment. As Heilman et al (2015) state, understanding the processes that give rise to gender bias and the conditions that encourage it, is necessary to eliminate it from organisational decision-making.

At the job analysis stage the CIPD (2018c) recommend being much more aware of organisation fit as well as person–job fit, as this may reduce purely hiring people with the obvious qualifications and experience. In terms of attracting applicants, a review of the actual job adverts is a good place to start. Again the CIPD (2018c) state; ‘Even small changes to wording on a job advert can make a difference’. The Application process could be modified; even to go as far as removing CVs and creating bespoke application forms that are scored to allow for a degree of transparency. Selection techniques, especially interviews could be a lot more open to scrutiny. The same questions should be asked to each candidate, with interviews again scored.

Limitations

The limitations of the research are clear. Within a short timescale, a very small sample size of business partners working with businesses to advise them on equality and diversity issues were approached. This made sense in terms of timescales and ease of gathering data.

With research being interpretivist, thoughts and opinions were gathered, rather than specific qualitative data drawn from organisations themselves. Indeed, bias of the interviewer and interviewees (who are aware of unconscious bias and are looking for it) might also affect validity and the results. The sample of business partners also deal with relatively small numbers of business themselves, so responses were confined to opinions based on interaction with 50 current businesses. These issues impacts on the ability to draw any wider considerations; there is no evidence to suggest the findings can be applied to the wider world or that unconscious bias is a problem in all recruitment. Further research needs to be undertaken to assess this.

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Appendices