

# SE3<sup>≡</sup>

NCSEA SE3 Committee  
Firm DEI Resources Group

# INCLUSIVE RECRUITMENT & HIRING PRACTICES



Recommendations and ideas to improve diversity at structural engineering firms through intentional recruitment and hiring.

**MAY 2022**



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# INTRODUCTION

Part of improving diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in structural engineering firms begins with intentional recruitment for technical (and other) staff. Following are some guidelines and recommendations to consider in evaluating candidates, where and how you recruit new employees, and inclusive interview strategies that reduce bias and provide equal access and opportunity for all candidates.

## SET YOUR DIVERSITY GOALS

As a firm defines its diversity goals, it's important to define what is meant by "diversity." The definitions and intentions may vary depending on various factors, both internal to the firm and external to the marketplace. Those working to improve diversity should consider or discuss their current demographic composition and what types of diverse identities and perspectives may be missing in order to drive innovation, gain market share, or meet the company's business goals.

Below is a (non-exhaustive) list of identities to consider as you create intentionally inclusive recruitment and hiring practices:

- Race
- Ethnicity
- Gender and Gender Identity
- Sexual Identity
- Religious Affiliation
- Country or Region of Origin
- Educational Background
- Veteran Status or Military Affiliation
- Age and Generational Identity
- Ability and Disability Status
- First-Generation College Graduate

# MINIMIZE BIAS IN JOB APPLICATIONS

Though the majority of recruitment now occurs online, with candidates submitting their information via portals that may be grounded in algorithms and artificial intelligence, this process can evoke bias<sup>1</sup> just as easily as in-person recruitment. Consider the following strategies to mitigate bias from online job portals that may hinder inclusive recruitment efforts.

## RETHINK HOW YOUR JOB POSTINGS ARE WRITTEN

Removing bias from your job descriptions and using more inclusive text are great starting points that can improve the digital application process. Certain words and phrases evoke gendered or other slanted imagery and may discourage certain candidates from applying if they don't feel a connection with the job description. One example of this that showcases how to tone down overly masculine language is below:<sup>2</sup>

### **AVERAGE JOB DESCRIPTION:**

Strong communication and influencing skills. Ability to perform individually in a competitive environment. Superior ability to satisfy customers and manage company's association with them.

### **BETTER JOB DESCRIPTION:**

Proficient oral and written communications skills. Collaborates well in a team environment. Sensitive to clients' needs, can develop positive client relationships.

Additionally, including minimum qualifications that are not entirely necessary may introduce unnecessary bias.<sup>3</sup> For example, you may make certain educational requirements more flexible (e.g. master's degree preferred but not required) or allow remote work to engage people who may not be able to afford to live in certain cities or regions. As another example, consider the oft-cited statistic that men are more likely than women to apply for a position for which they do not meet all the requirements.<sup>4,5</sup>

## CONSIDER USING REDACTED RESUMES

The classic research experiment says it all: Emily and Greg are more readily hired than Lakisha and Jamal.<sup>6</sup> In other words, ethnic names on resumes get fewer callbacks compared to the exact same resumes using common, racially White-sounding names. Consider using software (or partnering with your HR department) to strip names, ethnicity, gender, and possibly even universities (which can invoke bias) from resumes before sending them to hiring managers. This allows managers to focus on the qualifications and skills of the candidate, not whatever preconceived notion they might have about the candidate's gender, ethnicity, or a particular school.

## How does using redacted resumes interact with the goal of intentionally inclusive hiring?

Well, it can be challenging. You're not alone if you're thinking, "how do we increase the educational diversity of our staff when we can't see the schools that our candidates attended?" Trying to not invoke bias regarding one group of people—either for or against—can be difficult. Remember, the ultimate goal is to seek out qualified candidates and to, as much as possible, try not to make assumptions about their qualifications from other facts about them. If you operate with that goal in mind, you will be taking a step toward more inclusive hiring practices.

## CONSIDER FORTIFYING YOUR EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY LANGUAGE

The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission requires that every American employer include an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) statement in their job postings that includes the words "(Company Name) is an Equal Opportunity Employer" followed by a policy statement that details non-discriminatory practices. Most companies include some basic version of this on their job posting web page.

Consider the following example,<sup>7</sup> which elaborates further to both emphasize the importance of diversity in the company's values and also acknowledges their continued efforts to achieve their goals. This facilitates a more candid dialogue about their efforts, which may feel more welcoming and transparent to candidates of diverse backgrounds.

### **LEGALLY, WE NEED YOU TO KNOW THIS:**

We do not discriminate in employment matters on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, national origin, age, military service eligibility, veteran status, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, or any other protected class. We support workplace diversity.

### **BUT WE WANT TO ADD THIS:**

We strongly believe that the perspectives and experiences yielded by diverse identities contribute to a broader collective perspective that will consistently lead to a better company and better products.

We are working hard to increase the diversity of our team wherever we can, and we actively encourage everyone to consider becoming an intentional part of this effort.

# REVIEW YOUR RECRUITMENT PRACTICES

When looking to increase the diversity of your staff, it is important to understand that where and how you recruit has as much of an impact as who you recruit. The process is the product; if you recruit from the same few places, you are more likely to have a more homogeneous group, at least in some respects.

Understanding what types of diversity would be good for your company and then targeting appropriate educational institutions—Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), for example—is one way to increase the diversity in your firm. An even more targeted effort may be to create a pipeline development program with an HBCU or other Minority Serving Institution (MSI) through which your firm provides development and cultivation of the talent they wish to hire.

## EVALUATE YOUR RECRUITMENT LOCATIONS <sup>8</sup>

Understanding why your firm recruits at specific universities and what kind of students those universities yield can help reveal the potential limitations of those universities. Seeking partnerships with other institutions in different regions, with other specialties, or that have a different demographic of students can help your firm diversify your pool of candidates. If budget is a concern, consider rotating the career fairs you attend each year or attending virtual career fairs that have multiple universities participating.

Getting involved at target universities by joining advisory boards, donating to student project initiatives, or presenting to classes on projects your firm has completed are other ways to build a connection between your firm and a specific university to start a pipeline of applicants to your firm.

## EXPAND YOUR NETWORK <sup>8, 9, 10</sup>

For recruiting more mid-career employees, consider partnering with identity-based professional associations. Such partnerships may include advertising on organizations' job boards, attending their conferences, sponsoring scholarships, and supporting their efforts to cultivate new engineers in the field. Following are some suggested organizations, many of which have regional or university-based chapters for more targeted partnerships:

- National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE): <https://www.nsbe.org>
- Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE): <https://www.shpe.org>
- Society of Women Engineers (SWE): <https://swe.org>
- American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES): <https://www.aises.org>

Expanding your network does not mean lowering the standards of your recruitment practices, it means being intentional about finding skilled and qualified talent in places you may not have recruited before.

## CONSIDER CLUSTER OR COHORT HIRES

A more progressive recruitment strategy, cluster hires facilitate the creation of a “critical mass” to avoid tokenizing the few employees who may already exist (or perhaps, the first few that are recruited and hired).

Keep in mind that when recruiting BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) candidates—particularly African American and Latinx—existing representation is critically important for creating psychological safety and avoiding the phenomenon of being “the lonely only.” The same is true for hidden identities, such as gender identity, sexual identity, veteran status, and ability, as these candidates may wish to know whether it’s “safe” to reveal themselves in the workplace.

### Wondering how to prevent “the lonely only” phenomenon for hidden identities?

This is another tough one because a recruiting team often won’t know about these identities (hence why they’re “hidden”). However, if you keep the mindset of inclusion, acceptance, and focusing on qualifications at the forefront of your recruiting practices (and office culture), you can create a workplace where every person feels free to express their true selves.

## SEND EMPLOYEES OF DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS TO RECRUIT AND INTERVIEW CANDIDATES

Who you send to career fairs or have present at interviews can influence an applicant’s perception of your firm. People are naturally attracted to those who are similar to them—it’s called “affinity bias” or “like me bias.” Having a diverse group of people meaningfully involved in your recruitment and interviewing efforts—including the decision-making process—can help yield more diverse employees.

For firms that already have a critical mass of employees of diverse backgrounds and can leverage them in meaningful ways (including seeking and accepting their input in the process, candidate selection, and other relevant tasks), doing so can be beneficial to continuing to expand the diversity within the firm. Note the dangers of tokenism here, should there only be a few members of minoritized groups in the firm that are asked to participate in these efforts.

Buy-in is key; involving employees you wish to leverage in critical parts of the process beyond them just being a “face in the place” will likely make them feel less marginalized or tokenized in well-intentioned efforts.

## **SHOWCASE WHO IS SUCCESSFUL AT YOUR FIRM <sup>11</sup>**

The perception you create when you put together an interview panel or recruitment team is that those are the types of people who are successful at your firm. When a candidate can see themselves represented in your team, they feel that they can succeed at your firm. Conversely, a homogenous panel can send the message that only specific types of people can advance to leadership roles at your firm.

Intentionally include a diverse group among those who interface with potential candidates, even if this means tapping younger staff members or bringing in people from other offices. Emphasize that such involvement is a leadership opportunity and is a result of their success at the firm.

## **BE CONSCIENTIOUS OF OVEREXTENDING CERTAIN PEOPLE <sup>9</sup>**

Having a group of recruiters and interviewers of diverse backgrounds will speak volumes to applicants, but be cognizant of your staff's personal bandwidth. Make sure you are not tapping the same people for every interview or recruitment event; you do not want to burn them out or make them feel tokenized.

When starting the process, firms may not have the diversity required to send many different people to recruitment events and may need to rely on a handful of individuals. In that case it is important to have a conversation with those individuals to ensure they are willing participants in this process and that their involvement will be taken into consideration in performance evaluations, promotions, and other opportunities for increased visibility within the firm.

## **GET INVOLVED IN YOUR COMMUNITY**

Improving the pipeline through your community is another good, more long-term (though less direct) way to increase the diversity of future applicants. Consider partnering with high schools and middle schools to expose students to engineering. Many cities have local programs, and the ACE Mentor Program of America (<https://www.acementor.org>) is a way to get involved with high school students interested in the AEC industry.



# ESTABLISH A FORMALIZED INTERVIEW PROCESS

How your staff interact with candidates influences which candidates are offered—and accept—positions at your firm. The following information addresses minimizing unconscious bias, as one important first step is understanding what unconscious bias is and how it affects the hiring process.

## MINIMIZE UNCONSCIOUS BIAS <sup>12,13</sup>

There are several unconscious biases that find their way into recruitment to the detriment of finding candidates of diverse backgrounds. Three of them are:

**CONFIRMATION BIAS** is the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one's existing beliefs or theories. In other words, when we want something to be true, our brains will work hard to find information that “proves” that it's true—and ignore any evidence that contradicts it.<sup>12</sup>

**“LIKE ME” BIAS, OR AFFINITY BIAS** refers to the fact that we get along with people who tend to look and think like we do.<sup>14</sup> This can make us favor candidates who are similar to us rather than being open to someone different.

**GENDER AND RACE BIASES** are deep-rooted beliefs about the difference in abilities or skills between genders or races based on socialization. This can unfairly and inaccurately influence the perception of competence of certain candidates based upon their race and/or gender. This is particularly compounded for intersections of race and gender, such as with women of color.

While bias awareness is the first step, addressing biases in each step of a recruitment strategy is an ongoing process that requires discussion, reflection, revision, and possibly professional help. As Professor Iris Bohnet from Harvard Kennedy School puts it, “While it's exceedingly difficult to remove bias from an individual, it's possible to design organizations in ways that make it harder for biased minds to skew judgment.”<sup>15</sup> Consider bias mitigation as you work through organizing and training your recruitment team via some of the suggestions below.

## ESTABLISH A CONSISTENT AND ROBUST INTERVIEW PRACTICE

Each candidate should go through the same process, ideally with the same people, at your firm. Consistency yields objectivity and gets us closer to fairness. An example of a robust interview practice is below.

1. Internal kickoff meeting with the recruitment team to discuss everyone's roles, timelines, and candidate evaluation criteria. This should include a thorough understanding of the job description and the job requirements versus preferences.

2. Candidate interview, which could occur all in one day or over multiple days:

- a. A shorter, more casual, introductory interview (or phone interview) with two hiring managers (hopefully an intentionally diverse team).
- b. A technical quiz or test. Ensure that the test is objective and that those evaluating the results are looking strictly at the merits of outcomes.
- c. A formal interview in which the candidate meets multiple people at the company. Individual interviews are best, as they allow the candidate an opportunity to meet people one-on-one and give each interviewer an opportunity to thoroughly evaluate the candidate on their merits.<sup>15</sup>

3. Post-interview internal recap with the recruitment team, which includes an evaluation of the candidates' ability to perform required job functions. And, if possible (and after the candidate's position has been filled), a post-interview survey or feedback session from the candidate.

### PRO TIP:

Incorporating younger staff into hiring can be an effective way to relate to younger candidates, mentor staff regarding hiring, and show candidates that your company actively empowers and values the opinions of younger staff. This is especially helpful at smaller firms that may not have robust hiring or management teams or at firms where staff of more diverse backgrounds tends to be younger.

## USE A STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROCESS<sup>3,8,9,15,16</sup>

Research shows that unstructured interviews—which lack defined questions and whereby a candidate's experience and expertise are meant to unfold organically through conversation—are often unreliable for predicting job success.<sup>16</sup> Instead, use the same set of questions in the same order for each candidate. This ensures consistency and allows the recruitment team to present questions that were thoughtfully considered beforehand instead of topics introduced on the fly.

### Feeling like this might stymie a more comfortable, conversational interview?

It may disrupt this feeling at first, but once you practice your new structured interview process, you will gain a comfort level with the questions and flow of the meeting. And, because each candidate is different, there will be different answers and small tangents within the structured questions for you to explore. But having an overarching structure and road map for interviews makes sure that each candidate largely walks the same path through your interview process, giving you more consistent information that can be more easily compared between candidates.

## **OUTLINE THE EVALUATION CRITERIA AND SCORING SYSTEM**

Decide which specific metrics your team is evaluating and how you will measure or score those metrics. The metrics should be directly associated with the job description and the requirements of the role. Score each answer immediately after it is provided to neutralize a variety of biases.<sup>15</sup>

## **CONSIDER REQUIRING A DIVERSE SLATE OF CANDIDATES OR SETTING DIVERSITY TARGETS<sup>9</sup>**

This may require more time and effort than simply hiring the most qualified person currently available through existing efforts. However, this is one way to ensure that candidates with diverse backgrounds are seriously considered in the hiring process. Be sure to audit this process over time and check to see how effective it is in meeting your diversity goals. Keep in mind that the selection process is just as important as the recruitment process in improving the diversity within your firm.

# OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER

There are many important and effective things that your company can do to recruit and hire staff of diverse backgrounds, a few of which are suggested in this paper. Three important points are worth noting when considering improving your recruitment and hiring processes:

## 1. INTENTIONALLY INCLUSIVE HIRING CAN INITIALLY TAKE MORE TIME <sup>9</sup>

And like anything new, it may not go smoothly right away.<sup>3</sup> Enter into the process with this understanding. If you don't see results right away, that's ok—the important thing is that your firm is taking action, entering into the process with an open mind, and being willing to put in the work to improve your recruitment process over time.

## 2. EVALUATE AND CONTINUALLY IMPROVE YOUR PROCESS

Ensure that your process includes a mechanism to receive feedback and make improvements. No process is perfect initially; give yourself room to discuss, reflect, and revise to continue to improve. Discuss among your team successes, areas for improvement, and new ideas. Measure success with data—track your progress over time to see if you are making progress toward your goals. If possible, talk to candidates to request their feedback after their position has been filled; understanding the process from their point of view can help you shape your interactions with future candidates.

## 3. THE OTHER HALF OF THE DEI RECRUITMENT EQUATION IS RETENTION OF STAFF WITH DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

While not discussed in this paper, this is the next step to ensuring that your efforts to recruit candidates from diverse backgrounds don't lead to a revolving door that does not improve the overall diversity of your firm. Retention of staff involves ensuring that your company culture is inclusive and actually fosters growth and success in each individual<sup>8</sup> through psychological safety, belonging, and an environment where everyone can bring their “whole selves” to work.

Recruiting and hiring staff of diverse backgrounds does not happen overnight and takes significant intentionality and commitment by firms. However, the results for your current and future staff, as well as the success of your firm overall, are worth the extra effort.

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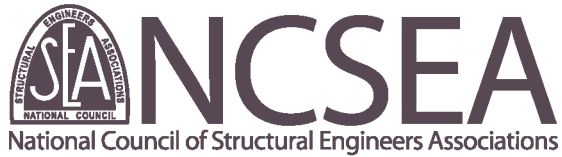
## GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

AISES	American Indian Science and Engineering Society
BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, and people of color
DEI	Diversity, equity, and inclusion
HBCU	Historically Black Colleges and Universities
HSI	Hispanic Serving Institutions
MSI	Minority Serving Institutions
NSBE	National Society of Black Engineers
SHPE	Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers
SWE	Society of Women Engineers

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©2022 NCSEA SE3 Committee - Published May 2022

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