



Diversifying Apprenticeship: Acknowledging Unconscious Bias to Improve Employee Access

August 2020

At a Glance

Promoting frontline workers to more senior positions is a great way to improve workforce diversity, but unconscious bias can prevent employees from getting the training they need to advance.

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About JFF's Center for Apprenticeship & Work-Based Learning

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For more than 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions—including apprenticeship and work-based learning programs—that create access to economic advancement for all. These programs are proven methods for connecting people to good careers while providing employers with skilled workers. The Center consolidates JFF's broad skills and expertise on these approaches into a unique offering. We partner with employers, government agencies, educators, industry associations, and others to build and scale effective, high-quality programs. Visit jff.org/center.

Introduction

More innovation. More accuracy.¹ Greater financial performance.² These are just some of the many benefits that a diverse workforce brings to an organization. Imagine, then, the results of an organization that is diverse from the frontline staff all the way up to the C-suite and the board of directors.

Outreach to and recruitment of new hires are often seen as the go-to options for increasing an organization's diversity. But promoting people from within can also be a powerful way to build equity for companies that already employ a pool of diverse entry-level and frontline talent—and it costs less than recruiting and onboarding new hires.³ This practice can help organizations fill its managerial ranks with proven employees who are already familiar with the company. It can also be an effective “homegrown” means of increasing diversity at every level and thereby enabling the organization to reap those verified benefits.

Unfortunately, this isn't yet reality for many companies. Well-intended diversity efforts often focus on entry-level staff roles—an approach that can further exacerbate the disparity between management and frontline workers.⁴ For example, managers in the retail industry are overwhelmingly white men, while entry-level, hourly-wage workers are more likely to be white women and women of color.⁵ And in the foodservice and restaurant industry, 92 percent of executive employees are white while ethnic and racial minorities account for half of all hourly employees.⁶

To ensure that entry-level workers are prepared for the next level, some companies are implementing apprenticeship programs to provide their incumbent workers (employees already working at a company) with the structure and training that will help them move up the career ladder. For example, in 2016, JFF helped support the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation and the American Hotel and Lodging Association in creating the Hospitality Sector Registered Apprenticeship to increase opportunities to advance into higher-paying management positions in the restaurant, food service, and hospitality industries.⁷

What Is Apprenticeship?

Apprenticeship is a workforce training model that combines paid on-the-job learning and formal classroom instruction to help a worker master the knowledge and skills needed for career success. High-quality apprenticeships typically include supervision and mentoring, and usually offer participants progressive wage increases. They align with industry standards and result in a nationally recognized credential.

Apprenticeships for incumbent workers provide participants with opportunities to gain new skills and experiences that enable them to advance within their current organizations.

Maximizing your company's results is contingent upon tapping into the right talent. When an apprenticeship is made available, the process for choosing the workers who participate is critical. Apprenticeships set employees up for success and, in turn, can lead to better outcomes for employers. However, decisions about who gets to enter into these programs—and take advantage of the valuable opportunities they offer—are susceptible to bias. Research focused on the topic of bias in the workplace offers initial lessons learned about the role bias can play in recruitment, hiring, and promotion.

COVID-19 Impacts and Considerations

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the workforce and the ways that training across industries is designed and implemented. With the need for social distancing, training has been either put on hold or transitioned to a virtual setting, and pre-apprenticeship programs must adapt how they engage with and support their participants. Work-based learning activities and hands-on learning that are traditionally done in-person must be redesigned for remote settings, and a special emphasis needs to be placed on continued engagement and partnership with employers as they struggle to maintain their workforce.

For more strategies on responding to COVID-19, please visit: <https://www.jff.org/covid-19-our-shared-responsibility/>.

Lessons About Unconscious Bias in the Workplace

Unconscious bias, or implicit bias, refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.⁸ Our unconscious biases (everyone has them) may actually be misaligned with our declared beliefs or in conflict with our conscious attitudes, behaviors, and interactions.⁹

These biases can often act as barriers to advancement opportunities for workers from diverse populations. As a result of *unconscious bias*—unsupported judgments in favor of or against a person or group as compared to another—managers may prefer to hire people who are similar to themselves, putting those who are culturally different from them at a disadvantage.^{10 11} A study of long-term health care apprenticeships found that programs in which managers chose the participants had cohorts where people of just one race and/or ethnicity made up 71 to 96 percent of the participants.¹² Those participants had been chosen based on their managers' subjective analysis of who had “positive attitudes, leadership qualities, and experience.”

A particular challenge is that, while discrimination is prevalent in U.S. workplaces, it can be unintentional.¹³ Purposeful planning, innovative training approaches, and intentional company culture change can all support more equitable workplaces that provide advancement for all qualified workers. Although diversity training for managers has been on the rise, there has been little evidence that these trainings alone reduce bias.¹⁴ However, abandoning unconscious bias training based on skepticism is not the answer. As a best practice, companies should still offer diversity trainings for hiring managers but implement additional, complementary structures to create a supportive environment for diversity. Companies committed to diversity goals can maximize their talent if they actively deploy a variety of intentional strategies aimed at the specific goal of ensuring that managers do not overlook *any* high-quality workers.

What Is Unconscious Bias?

[Unconscious biases](#) are social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness.

We process so much information every second that our brains have devised a shorthand system to save us time. But this often relies on stereotypes and leads us to make assumptions. The danger is not simply that we have unconscious biases, but that they can cause us to [act unfairly](#).

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) offers several resources to help prevent hiring bias.¹⁵ Although many of these strategies and accompanying tools have been created with hiring and performance evaluations in the traditional workplace in mind, the research tells a consistent story that has lessons for organizations that select incumbent workers for apprenticeships and other types of training programs that can lead to opportunities for advancement.

Recommendations for Selecting Incumbent Workers to Be Apprentices

Companies can begin to mitigate unconscious bias by both closely reviewing their selection processes and embracing lessons from best practices in how recruiters hire new employees to reduce the centrality of a manager's subjective considerations.¹⁶ Here are a few examples.

Widen the selection pool.

One of the more common steps in the selection process is to create a pool of candidates based on managers' recommendations—yet this is susceptible to unconscious bias.^{17 18} One way to widen the pool is to look beyond manager input for other ways to identify candidates.

One option is to have graduates of an already diverse program take part in recruiting new apprentices. For example, several companies that implemented the Industrial Manufacturing Technician (IMT) Registered Apprenticeship actively recruited diverse populations into early cohorts, and when those participants completed the program, they helped recruit future classes of potential apprentices. This helped drive diverse participation: In 2016, only 3 percent of the participants in all industrial apprenticeships were women and 96 percent were white, while the IMT apprenticeship was 16 percent women and 28 percent people of color.¹⁹

Some employers have gone even further and made participation mandatory for employees with specific job titles. Additionally, to reduce the opportunity for manager bias, companies could consider allowing all employees to opt in on their own.²⁰

Seek out workers across skill levels.

Redefine training descriptions to inspire employees of all skill levels to participate. Rely less on a narrow eligible field of candidates identified based on criteria such as length of employment, seniority, or other proxies, such as holding a formal degree. Such approaches replicate the lack of diversity that may be a result of historical discrimination practices.²¹ If employers are investing in training for their workers already, these advancement opportunities can expand access to higher-wage jobs for a broader set of workers.

Develop transparent, detailed, and uniform criteria to assess skills.

Measure against a specific rubric to avoid allowing selections to be based on a manager's subjectivity—such as whether the manager likes one employee more than another.²² These types of scoring guidelines reduce bias by quantitatively comparing candidates' skills.²³ Objective criteria such as attendance, on-time record, and job proficiency rating should complement and override personal characteristics.²⁴ Also, using a blind assessment by redacting names can help decision makers focus on candidates' talents without being influenced by demographic assumptions.²⁵

Get multiple perspectives.

Solicit input from multiple supervisors in order to overcome the influence of any individual manager's bias. Peer-to-peer recommendations and union input can also be useful.

Complement selection processes with program designs that increase access.

Provide supports: Appropriate support structures are crucial to helping all workers succeed. They can include a welcoming environment (especially for people from underrepresented demographics), job shadowing opportunities, mentoring programs, and extra supports for English learners (such as translations of training documents in their native languages).²⁶ Partnering with local organizations to provide case management services also helps workers thrive.²⁷

Establish readiness programs: Provide pre-apprenticeship opportunities or readiness testing and training to develop employees who may not meet initial selection requirements.²⁸

A Workforce of Today

Diversity is no longer an option—it is a business imperative for any company that wants to stay relevant in 21st century America. Companies that look to diversify throughout their ranks today will be best positioned to succeed.

Apprenticeship programs for incumbent workers cannot solve every diversity need in an organization. However, those that select and support a wide range of individuals will help a company create a pipeline to diversify its management, leading to increased retention, better business performance, and an opportunity to remain competitive today and into the future.

Now with what we know about unconscious bias, and about strategies for mitigating its influence on the selection process, we have an opportunity to use upskilling and apprenticeship strategies as a powerful tools for diversifying organizations by opening up advancement opportunities to all employees.

Acknowledgments

This product was funded in part by the generosity of The Annie E. Casey Foundation and Associated Black Charities, Inc. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of either The Annie E. Casey Foundation or the Associated Black Charities, Inc. Initial development of this publication was funded through the generous support of Salesforce.org.

The author would like to thank the following for their valuable insight on this topic and assistance in the publication:

- Rhandi Berth, Director of Industry Initiatives, WRTP/BIG STEP
- Vanessa Bennett, Associate Director, JFF
- Presceia Cooper-Dennis, Director of Talent Acquisition, JFF
- Deborah Kobes, Senior Director, JFF
- Mark Melnick, Executive Director of Workforce Strategic Partnerships, Ivy Tech Community College
- The Multicultural Foodservice & Hospitality Alliance
- Lucretia Murphy, Senior Director, JFF
- Eric Seleznow, Senior Advisor, JFF
- John Shortt, Director, Program Development at National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation
- Myriam Sullivan, Director, JFF

Endnotes

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