

# Strategies to improve workforce diversity in the public sector



THE  
BEHAVIORAL  
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# KEY INSIGHTS FOR ADVANCING DIVERSITY IN GOVERNMENT RECRUITING AND HIRING

Recruiting and selecting the right people is fundamental to organizational success. Increasing diversity in public sector recruitment, however, is not as simple as posting on a job board and hoping for a diverse applicant pool. Government agencies can garner valuable lessons from behavioral science, organizational behavior, and occupational psychology to improve their recruitment and hiring processes.

By harnessing knowledge about how people actually behave, agencies can design and execute recruitment policies that are in sync with real-world behavior, reaching historically underrepresented populations and diversifying the applicant pool for public sector positions. **In this report, the Behavioral Insights Team has applied a behavioral lens to distill the existing evidence into actionable insights that government agencies can apply throughout the recruitment arc, from job postings to final hiring decisions.**



## Make it easy

Update processes to facilitate applicants' and recruiters' decision-making.



## Make it attractive

Provide cues to attract diverse candidates.



## Make it social

Expand your reach via social media, messengers, and employee referrals.



## Make it timely

Provide reminders and encouragement to applicants at strategic points in the process.

**This report's objective is to give practitioners and policymakers across the public sector a starting point for future applications of behavioral insights to recruitment and hiring.(1)**



## Make it easy

### Update processes to facilitate applicants' and recruiters' decision-making.

#### Use structured interviews and assessments to make equitable hiring easier

Unconscious bias may cause hiring managers to favor certain candidates. For example, hiring managers may over-rely on first impressions of candidates and discard later information that counteracts that impression.(2) Hiring teams may also flexibly reinterpret definitions of good performance to fit candidates that they favor.(3)

**Highly structured interviews have been found to reduce unconscious bias.**(4) Structured interviews usually include:

- Asking each candidate the same questions in the same order;
- Limiting follow-up questions;
- Using consistent rating scales to grade answers;
- Having the same set of interviewers engage with each candidate.

**Clearly defined evaluation criteria (e.g., for interview performance or work tasks) have been shown to decrease racial disparities in assessment.**(5) Scoring rubrics can also be an effective tool to increase equity in assessments, by explicitly describing what a weak, mixed, or strong answer looks like to minimize subjective impressions. Government agencies should create and implement templates to support structured interviews.

#### Directly assess candidates against one another

Research shows that evaluators are more likely to rely on group stereotypes when evaluating candidates in isolation, as opposed to when explicitly comparing candidates against one another.(6) For example, when assessing whether a female employee is ready for promotion, implicit gender stereotypes may lead women to receive worse evaluations than men. When directly assessing the performance of candidates against one another, hiring managers **rely less on intuitive judgments that are prone to bias and are more deliberate in their assessment.** While this research stems primarily from the context of promotions, it is likely also relevant to recruitment settings. In practice, agencies should instruct recruiters to review applications in “batches”, ideally considering one application element at a time across a group of candidates; for example, for a batch of ten applications that include an essay response to an open-ended question, recruiters should review all ten responses one after the other to evaluate the quality of each applicant’s response.

#### Test out a blind review process

Removing names, photos, and other personally identifying information from applicant CVs can help reduce bias in assessment. For example, a recent report on hiring in the public sector suggested that **Black women were 26% more likely to get an interview, and 33% more likely to get hired, when hiring managers could not see applicants’ personally identifiable information.**(7) It is important to note that blind review can backfire in some circumstances; for organizations already prioritizing diversity, a blind review may make it harder for them to take proactive steps to hire diverse candidates.(8) It is therefore important for organizations using blind reviews to track data on applicant demographics throughout the process, so they can identify and address any unintentional backfires created by the blind review process.



# Make it attractive

Provide cues to attract diverse candidates.

## Highlight non-obvious benefits of the job

Highlighting benefits of a job that may not already be clear to job seekers can be an effective strategy to attract new and diverse candidates. Working with the City of Chattanooga's Police Department, BIT found that **ego-based messages** (that is, messages that emphasized challenge, career, and encouraged people to join for personal or career-based reasons) **were more effective than prosocial messages that emphasized service and impact in attracting new applicants, especially from racial minority candidates.**(9,10)

Government agencies should include this kind of strategic messaging in outreach materials and job postings.

## Keep the requirements clear and eliminate "nice-to-haves"

The description of the job requirements can affect who applies. The Scottish Government found job postings that provide a **clear description of the required levels of skills and experience** can attract women to roles they might **otherwise have self-selected out of based on misperceptions of what the role requires.**(11) By including "nice-to-haves" in the job description, recruiters can unintentionally reduce the number of female applicants.

In addition to biasing who applies, how job advertisements are written can influence applicants' decision to negotiate working conditions. A study conducted by Monash University and the University of Chicago, for example, evaluated the effect of including a statement indicating that salary is negotiable in job advertisements. Seeing the statement, women were slightly more likely than men to negotiate their salary, while the absence of such a statement led men, mostly, to negotiate.(12) A simple sentence can therefore nudge women to seek a higher starting salary, helping to reduce the gender pay gap over time.

Agencies should be specific about what is required for the job in the posting and limit the number of preferred qualifications listed.

## Signal a genuine commitment to diversity

**The perceived value that an organization places on diversity is an important determinant of whether minority job seekers will be interested in applying.** For example, when a Fortune 500 company explicitly signaled its interest in employee diversity in recruitment communications, it resulted in more than double the indicated interest in openings among racial minority applicants.(13) It also increased the likelihood that minority candidates applied and then, subsequently, were selected for a job.(14) However, BIT's signaling experiment found no significant effect on participants' likelihood of application; therefore, more research is needed to determine whether this is a promising intervention or not.



# Make it social

Expand your reach via social media, messengers, and employee referrals.

## Use social media to reach young professionals

Job postings tailored to attract diverse candidates can only be effective if they reach your target audience. Young professionals are more likely than earlier generations to find job opportunities using social media sites like LinkedIn and Facebook. In fact, a market intelligence group's study reports that **73% of 18- to 34-year-olds found their last job through a social network.**(15) Governments can use this trend to their advantage and expand their reach by building a greater presence on social media platforms like Facebook or LinkedIn.

## Engage relevant messengers

People are more likely to act on a message delivered by a source perceived as credible, expert, or similar to themselves.(16) For example, a recruitment message from a Black police officer is a particularly effective method for recruiting Black police force candidates.(17) When BIT interviewed college students and campus career service professionals to better understand how and why young professionals seek out jobs, they identified alums as an effective messenger: **when seeing someone like them working in an organization, students feel more compelled to look up the employer.**

Government agencies should engage current employees to act as ambassadors to their alma maters or communities from which they would like more applicants.

## Focus referral programs on underrepresented groups

Referrals are another way to leverage messenger effects. **Targeted referrals** (i.e., encouraging referrals of members of underrepresented groups for positions) **can increase applications from those underrepresented groups.** For example, the UK Ministry of Defense ran a campaign encouraging women to refer other women for vacant job positions at the Ministry. It resulted in twice as many women being referred to the referral group and a 13 percentage point increase in the number of women who applied. (18) However, the overall share of job offers to women did not change, suggesting that targeted referrals work, but should be supplemented with additional diversity and inclusion efforts further downstream in the hiring process.



## Make it timely

Provide reminders and encouragement to applicants at strategic points in the process.

### **Align the job posting and interview schedule with college/university graduation timelines**

Upcoming graduates generally experience a predictable sequence of events: searching and applying for jobs in the fall followed by interviews and final offers throughout the end of spring. **Agencies can plan recruitment events around this expected schedule.** For example, job postings at the beginning of the fall semester will be timely for many potential candidates who are starting to actively seek employment opportunities. **Agency recruiters can redouble their outreach efforts by coordinating with local HBCU or community college career service centers to host information sessions.**

In BIT-facilitated focus groups, college students also revealed a strong preference for application review timeline transparency so they know when to expect an interview or job offer. By communicating this information in a timely manner (e.g., in job postings or application receipt emails), recruiters can not only foster a sense of process transparency among applicants but also allow applicants to clearly assess the fit between their needs and the application process.

### **Support job seekers at important moments in the recruitment process**

People from underrepresented groups may experience a phenomenon known as “stereotype threat,” which is increased anxiety in situations like exams or hiring processes in part because they may be worried about confirming a stereotype about themselves or their group. This heightened anxiety can lead to underperformance.(19)

**Supporting minority job seekers at critical times in the application process can help to counteract stereotype threat.** In one recruitment study with the Avon and Somerset police constabularies in the UK, the greatest drop in minority applicants' success was observed during a Situational Judgment Test (SJT) —an online, multiple-choice assessment of how applicants might respond to real situations. When the process was modified to include a few sentences to ask applicants to reflect on what might make them a good addition to the police force and the significance that would have for their community, passage rates improved significantly.(20) **This minor, supportive intervention essentially closed the gap in the probability of passing the test between minority and non-minority candidates.**

# Conclusion

This report illustrates how understanding the decision-making paradigms of job seekers, HR representatives, and hiring managers and incorporating behavioral insights into recruitment processes can improve diversity in the public sector workforce. When strategizing 1) whom to recruit, 2) how to reach these specific people, and 3) how to fairly and equitably assess them, public sector agencies can implement the evidence-based best practices presented in this report to continuously enhance their recruitment process.

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14. Note: there is a risk to simply including a generic Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) statement in job postings. Potential applicants might interpret that the employer is seeking to recruit minority candidates as "token" hires rather than on their merit, and the application rate among minority candidates could actually decrease. (See "When Equal Employment Opportunity Statements Backfire: Evidence from a Natural Field Experiment on Job-Entry Decisions" by Andreas Leibbrandt and John List)
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