



Taking the Bias out of Hiring

Identifying and eliminating unconscious bias in recruitment processes.

By Elizabeth Merritt

I'm a fan of leading by doing.

Which is to say, when I suggest to museums (as I do in every section of TrendsWatch), "you might want to..." I always ask myself, and the Alliance, if we might "want to" as well.

Since a major focus of AAM's new strategic plan is diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion, I've been doing what I can to help the Alliance turn that focus inward. As we recruited our Ford W. Bell Fellow for Museums and K-12 Education, Katherine McNamee, AAM's director of human resources, and I tried out some emerging techniques to combat hiring bias. In this article, I'll share a bit about that process and what we learned.

Short version: "nontraditional" hiring takes more thought, more work, and more time than the familiar process of "write a job posting, put it online, collect resumes, compare, interview, hire." Doubtless it will take less time once we've developed and practiced new routines. But, starting from scratch, it took more than six months of reading, thinking, and digesting to even figure out what we might want to try. Hopefully, by sharing what AAM learns as we implement these practices, we can help shorten that part of the process for museums that want to work toward unbiased hiring.

After much thought, we targeted the following

points in recruitment where bias can creep in:

- defining the qualifications for the position
- writing the position description and the job posting
- disseminating the job posting
- structuring the application process
- evaluating the applications
- conducting interviews

Defining the Qualifications for the Position

All too often, people default to the assumption that “to do this job well, people ought to be like me—have this background, this education, this experience.” Research has documented that even well-meaning employers fall prey to this tendency and end up hiring people like themselves. Even when the requirements listed in job ads don’t replicate a supervisor’s resume, they are often proxies for what the employer really wants. “Bachelor’s degree required,” for example, may mean “I want someone who can write a coherent sentence” (even if we know from sad experience that the former doesn’t guarantee the latter). Unbiased hiring may require a lot of interpretation and imagination, helping a candidate show how their background, however unconventional, could be a good fit for a position.

The first thing we threw out was any assumption about education. We didn’t specify a required degree. This tactic was particularly appropriate for the fellowship, which is dedicated to exploring alternative educational futures. In fact, we listed as the most important qualification that the fellow should be “someone with a futures-oriented mindset, who is willing to challenge assumptions about how museums and schools work today.” To drive this home, we noted, “Personal experience (as a learner, parent, or educator) with alternative educational structures (home-schooling, un-schooling, experimental schools) would be a plus.” All the other qualifications were based on the skills needed to do the work associated with the fellowship. (Read the full position description at vibrantlearning.aam-us.org/fellowship-description.)

Writing the Position Description and Job Posting

A growing body of research shows that language has a huge effect on who will apply for a position. Tech companies in particular have put a lot of effort into parsing the gendered nature of job ads,

noting what words tend to attract male or female applicants. This has created a niche for companies that apply textual analysis to the job search. We used Textio, an online service that helps employers “find the magic words” to increase response rate and minimize bias.

Taking advantage of the free trial, we ran our draft through Textio’s algorithm to receive real-time analysis of and feedback on language as we edited the posting. (With a paid subscription, employers can vet multiple positions, as well as track and compare the results of their various searches.) Katherine and I tweaked our wording until the position description got a 100 percent score on the Textio system (see the screen capture below). While the system is designed to analyze position descriptions per se, we also used Textio for feedback on the language in our job posting.



Disseminating the Job Posting

To build a diverse staff, you need to reach a diverse pool of potential applicants. If we only talk to “people like us,” we limit potential hires from the start. In this case, we wanted to cast a wide net that might catch the interest of people whose roots lay in museums, education, futurism, policy, philanthropy—any number of fields. That meant we couldn’t just post to the AAM job board. We deployed several strategies to broaden our reach:

We established an outside advisory committee for the hiring process, which included a professional futurist, two entrepreneurs running alt-educational businesses, the CEO of an education-

related foundation, and an expert in education forecasting and reform. One of the members’ assignments was to disseminate the opportunity through their personal and professional networks.

We created a microsite dedicated to the future of education, populated with content from across the web, and pushed it as a go-to source of information on the topic in hopes of capturing a variety of readers. One section of the microsite was devoted to the search for the Ford Fellow.

I mined my contact list and sent personal emails to more than 80 people—leaders in the museum field, educators, futurists, philanthropists, consultants, entrepreneurs, student activists, journalists, and more—asking them to bring the position to the attention of people in their spheres.



Structuring the Application Process

As we removed a lot of traditional qualifications from the position description, we added to the application process opportunities for candidates to demonstrate what they could do. Such “challenge-based hiring” is more common in the tech sector (where an applicant might be asked to demonstrate coding, for example), but it is rapidly spreading to other fields. We designed four challenges that were presented to applicants over three rounds of review.

The initial challenge was linked to a CFM “future fiction” challenge, inviting people to submit a story of the future that featured museums in a starring role. This challenge ran at the same time as the fellow search, and though it was open to anyone, fellowship applicants were required to enter. Our stripped-down search criteria for the fellow were “passion and imagination about the future of education, the ability to communicate that passion via speaking and writing, and the skills to trial ideas in the real world.” The future fiction challenge was an opportunity to demonstrate three of these qualifications (passion, imagination, and communication skills).

From there, our top four candidates were presented with a second challenge. We asked the potential fellows to tell the internal hiring committee (via Skype video chat) “about one element you would want to include in your work plan—a notable goal that would have perceptible impact on the museum field and be of enduring value for the Alliance as we continue to address the future of education.” That interview was structured to explore how a

candidate’s skills, ability, and experience were suited to achieving the goal he or she described.

Out of those four applicants, we chose two for in-person interviews, which revolved around two more challenges. Each finalist spent an hour with the internal committee, with the bulk of the time devoted to a free-form discussion about their vision for the future of education in the United States. Each also gave a 15-minute presentation to a group of AAM staff, following guidelines to share “anything they are passionate about” with the goal of “leaving the audience wanting to know more.” Again, these challenges were designed to enable applicants to demonstrate vision, passion, and communication skills.

Evaluating the Applications

The outside search committee used a scoring rubric tied closely to the position’s goals and qualifications. Based on applicants’ cover letters and resumes, the committee rated them on:

- project-management skills
- written communication skills
- applicable work and personal experience (broadly interpreted; it could have been in museums, education, or other sectors)
- passion for educational reform
- futures-oriented mindset/willingness to challenge assumptions

A number of articles Katherine and I read recommended so-called “blind auditions” as the best practice possible. (When American orchestras started using a physical screen during auditions, so that

the hiring committee could not see the musicians, the percentage of female musicians in the country's top orchestras quickly climbed.) We played with the idea of masking gender in the initial evaluation round, but decided that the process of "blinding" the resumes and cover letters was too labor-intensive for our resources. However, members of the search committee did read and rate "blind" copies of the future fiction entries, not knowing which applicant wrote which story until after all scores were submitted. Both the resumes and the stories were taken into account in choosing our top candidates.

Conducting the Interviews

We structured the interviews using recommendations we'd gleaned from recent articles on best practices (such as one from *Harvard Business Review*: hbr.org/2016/04/how-to-take-the-bias-out-of-interviews). Based on this advice, we made sure that:

- we used the same questions with each candidate
- each question was asked in the same order and by the same person in every interview
- interviewers took notes in real time or as soon as possible afterward
- when we discussed candidates, we compared their answers to the same question, working through all the questions rather than doing an overall debrief on one candidate at a time

Outcomes

The posting attracted 40 applications, more than a quarter of which were ranked as highly competitive. The gender ratio was 75 percent female, 25 percent male, which was not as balanced as we had hoped. However, this might be tied to the fact that despite our outreach efforts, most of the applicants were from museum or museum-related backgrounds, with a sprinkling of educators—and both museums and education are highly feminized fields. To attract more applicants from outside the museum sector in the future, I would look for deeper ways to engage with partner organizations, such as publicizing at relevant conferences or guest blogging on other people's platforms.

On the downside, the process took a lot of time—on the part of staff, committee members, and applicants. On the upside, a number of people in each of those categories went out of their way to comment

that they found the process to be a learning experience. My boss, Rob Stein, who joined AAM just in time for the final two rounds of interviews, noted that unlike his usual experience with search committees (I believe he used the term "soul-killing"), this process was actually instructive. And we were very pleased with the quality of candidates—each round of review involved difficult choices.

Would I do it again? Yes, and Katherine and I are developing recommendations for which elements of this process AAM might mainstream into its recruiting. I found applicants' responses to the challenges particularly illuminating, in contrast to the opacity of the typical resume.

Things I didn't get to try that I might still like to experiment with (firsthand or as part of someone else's search process):

- true "blinding" of cover letters and applications, removing references to gender and maybe to specific schools
- first cut interviews via avatar, in which applicants can choose how to present themselves in a virtual realm (which would not only help anonymize the

interview with respect to legally protected statuses such as gender, age, and race, but also as-yet-unprotected classes, such as weight)

My colleague Nicole Ivy, who was a member of the internal search committee, chaired a panel on "Reducing Hiring Bias in Museums" at the Alliance's annual meeting last year. The excellent panelists explored a variety of techniques

to mitigate damage inflicted by unconscious filters that employers bring when recruiting new staff. You can download the session recording at aam.shop.webcast.guru/?download=3281 (free for conference attendees; \$15 otherwise). We will explore these tools in a forthcoming FutureLab project, inviting museums to test some of the strategies outlined above. Stay tuned for ways that your museum can get involved.

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