

SKILLSURVEY

The Science of Fairness.

Using Pre-Hire Assessments to Reduce
Bias and Build a More Diverse Workplace.

Race, ethnicity, religion, and national origin. Age, gender, and gender expression. Sexual orientation and social identity. Disability, education, life experience, and ways of thinking. Socio-economic status, veteran status, and local and regional differences.

In the United States especially, diversity has always been with us, influencing how we understand and negotiate our families, our neighborhoods, our communities, and our workplaces. That legacy shows no signs of slowing over the next few generations. If anything, diversity in the United States is on the rise. Statisticians point out that, over time, we will grow older, less white, and more educated. That statistical arc may be long, but our lived experience—in the workplace, at the supermarket, and even in our own families—confirms that who we are and who we will be is shifting—and fast.

Most organizations understand that diversity is here to stay. And talent management professionals understand that people with diverse perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds can help organizations work more creatively, innovate faster, and reach new markets.

Making diversity a cornerstone of your recruiting efforts makes good sense. Unfortunately, most organizations—95% of them—are failing to achieve their diversity goals. Measures to promote diversity and inclusion often hit the stumbling block of hidden bias—whether our own unconscious ones or biases embedded in our recruiting and selection processes.

While the challenges are real, a new generation of pre-hire reference assessment tools is making a difference. SkillSurvey Reference™ and the Pre-Hire 360® workflow are helping organizations reduce bias in the hiring process, make better progress toward their diversity and inclusion goals, and identifying talent who can thrive in a rapidly transforming workplace.

Why Diversity Matters

For all the attention paid to diversity in the workplace, our efforts to move the needle are largely failing. The EEOC notes that representation of women and minorities in companies of over 100 people has barely budged since 1985. In an [award-winning study](#) published by Harvard Business Review, researchers who spent five years studying three decades of corporate data found that most diversity efforts fail—or even worse, have an adverse effect. Mandatory training designed to reduce bias can backfire as employees respond with anger and resentment. Skills-based testing selectively applied can amplify bias. Women and minorities continue to fare worse during performance reviews. Even grievance processes, a last-gasp remedy, were found wanting.

Still, organizations continue to seek better ways to improve diversity and inclusion. And the reasons are clear. According to a [recent study](#) from McKinsey and Company, more diverse organizations perform better on key organizational metrics like recruiting, decision making, employee satisfaction, and brand management. A report based on their study of over 1,000 companies found that gender diverse organizations are 21% more likely to outperform their peers, and ethnically diverse organizations are 33% more likely to.

Business leaders are waking up to the potential of a more diverse workplace. In a [recent study](#) conducted by Deloitte, over 69 percent of executives rated diversity and inclusion as important; those ranking it a priority has risen by 32% since 2014.

Diversity is achievable—and worth investing in. At health-care provider Kaiser Permanente, [there is no racial majority and 75% of its workforce is female](#). One-third of its physicians are women, as are half of its executives. Its operating revenue [jumped by \\$8.1 billion in 2017](#) and it continues to excel at patient care and customer satisfaction.

Hidden Bias Can Derail Your Diversity Goals

On May 29, 2018, [Starbucks closed 8,000 of its stores](#) to conduct racial bias training in response to a racist incident at one of their Philadelphia stores. On October 5, 2017, the New York Times published an [interview with actress Ashley Judd](#), who accused Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment, a story that helped launch the #MeToo movement, a social media juggernaut which, in less than a year, has exposed the reach of sexual misconduct in the workplace.

Bias in the workplace is real. And its consequences can be devastating.

Most organizations that have established programs to counter bias and increase diversity and inclusion do so with good intentions. Why then, do these programs fail?

Simply put, wanting to do the right thing doesn't always correlate with doing the right thing. While most of us believe that we're ethical and unbiased, research confirms that that's not necessarily the case. We fall prey to biased thinking or unknowingly participate in biased processes.

“Most of us believe that we are ethical and unbiased...But more than two decades of research confirms that, in reality, most of us fall woefully short of our inflated self-perception.”

— Harvard Business Review

Study after study demonstrates that gender, race, life circumstances, and more can have an adverse effect on the selection process. Need some examples? There are many:

- When [evaluating candidates for an assistant professorship](#), both male and female faculty preferred the application packages of men, two to one, even when those application packages were identical, excepted for the name.
- Similar resumes randomly assigned “white sounding” versus “African American sounding” names prompted radically different reactions from recruiters: those with white-sounding names [received 50% more recalls for interviews](#).
- [Mothers were 43% less likely to be recommended for hire](#) than those without children.

Whether or not we want to admit it, bias affects the neutrality of our decisions. To change those behaviors, we need to begin by understanding how bias works.

Human biases, those that researchers refer to as cognitive biases, are the result of our life experiences and our (often faulty) way of thinking. These biases are hard to counter because they can be unconscious: selecting the candidate who is “like me” rather than the best candidate or making decisions based on stereotypes sometimes don't rise to the surface of conscious thought, but their effects can be as pernicious as those resulting from deliberate actions.

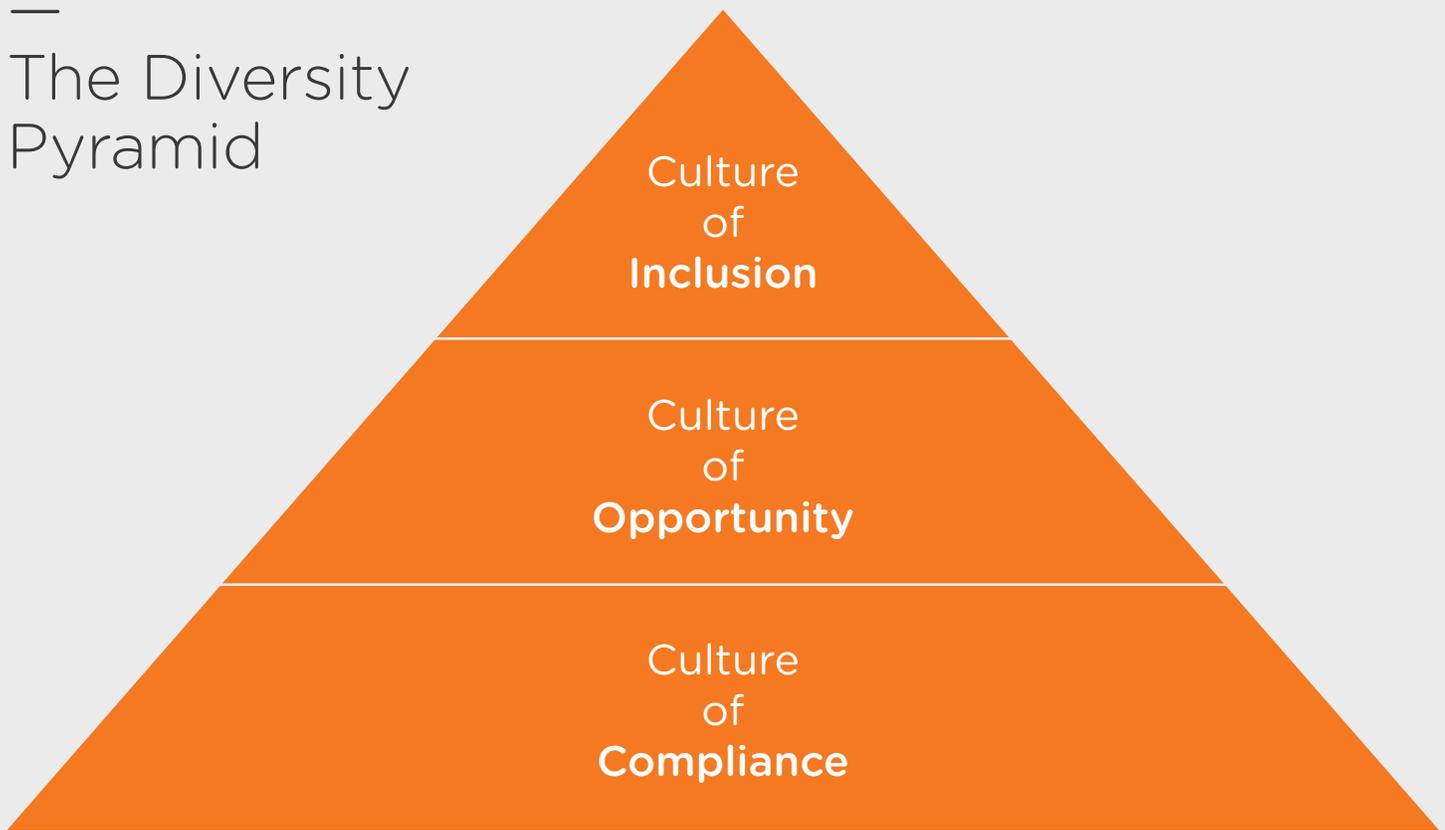
Procedural biases occur when the processes used to find or select candidates eliminate certain kinds of people--whether they have the skills and competencies to do the job or not. Only considering candidates who graduated from an Ivy League school or who worked at Google are examples of procedural bias: candidates who haven't listed the right institutions on their resumes can't get through the gate. Hidden biases can [lurk even in the language you use](#). Job postings in male-dominated fields often use gendered words like “dominate,” “competitive,” and “ninja,” leading qualified women less likely to apply.

Identifying—and eradicating—hidden bias from your hiring practices is possible. Start by analyzing how you source, select, and support your employees. Small adjustments to your sourcing channels and methods, multiple access points to your application process, and a consistent framework for interviewing job candidates can all have big effects. Involve employees across the organization in thinking about the positive benefits of diversity. Think about broadening your ideas of what diversity and inclusivity mean. And use tools that will help you gather the insight you need to make informed, unbiased decisions that will keep your organization strong and successful.

How Do Pre-Hire Assessments Help?

To broaden the reach of your recruiting efforts and ensure that your selection processes avoid bias, you will need to find new, more equitable ways to evaluate candidates. When we think about how to combat bias and build inclusivity, “the reference check” isn’t typically top-of-mind. But it should be. By incorporating a scientifically validated pre-hire reference checks into your hiring process, you can assure every job candidate is treated fairly and consistently. By eliminating bias in the recruiting and selection process, pre-hire reference assessments can open the door to candidates you might otherwise miss. Finally, with better insight into a candidate’s past performance, including a candidate’s personal commitment to civility and respect, you can more effectively build a culture of inclusion across your organization.

The Diversity Pyramid



All that from a reference check? If done right, you bet.

Build a Culture of Compliance

Reference checks are a key component of the hiring process. They can help confirm the accuracy of a resume or employment application, and provide new information that might not come to light during the interview process. Reference checks can also help you understand a candidate's character and suitability for a particular role. Most important, a reference check can deliver critical insights about how an individual has performed in the past—a key predictor of future success.

Like any HR process, reference checks—whether conducted by phone or with new HR technologies—must be compliant with anti-discrimination laws. But sometimes identifying bias can be difficult. Your best defense? Science.

SkillSurvey Reference is the only pre-hire reference assessment that has proven psychometric integrity—that is, our reference process meets professional and industry standards for reliability, validity and compliance. Simply put, when you use SkillSurvey's tools and its library of I/O psychologist designed surveys, you know that you are conducting pre-hire reference checks that support compliance with EEOC guidelines and are not biased against any protected class of job applicant. (We've published studies in the peer-reviewed International Journal of Selection and Assessment.)

What else makes us the leaders in EEOC compliance?

- **SkillSurvey Reference provides a consistent process that ensures all candidates are treated equally.** All references for a particular job candidate are presented with the same survey questions, and in the same format.
- **SkillSurvey Reference asks only about skills and behaviors that are relevant to and essential for a specific job.** You no longer need to worry about telephone calls that go off the rails.
- **SkillSurvey delivers job-specific libraries of surveys that are mapped to thousands of jobs.** You can choose the most appropriate survey for your needs.
- **SkillSurvey Reference generates electronic data and documentation to support the hiring decision.** You can demonstrate a consistent and relevant reference check process.

Building anti-discriminatory hiring practices is a necessary foundation for reducing bias and building a more diverse and inclusive organizational culture. But it's just the first step.

Open the Door to Opportunity

Diversity is more than a numbers game. At its heart, it's about building pathways to success for more people. That requires looking at the hiring process from top to bottom. Is your hiring criteria appropriate, objective, and job-specific? Do you source candidates from multiple channels to build a diverse pipeline? Do you include people of varying race, gender, and backgrounds on your interview panels? Have you identified opportunities for "blind hiring" (keeping candidates faces, names and other biographical information hidden from the selection committee). Is your selection criteria free from bias?

Building processes that reduce bias can help your organization build a more diverse pipeline of qualified candidates. But even the best processes can be undermined by human frailty. During the selection process, recruiters and hiring managers strive to assemble an accurate picture of a job candidate. But the truth is, the inputs that are typically available to us are incredibly limited. When information about past behavior is limited, our thinking can be faulty. Even appearance can play an outsized role in our decision making.

Choosing the right candidate for a job requires good data—and a lot of it. Past behavior is among the most predictive sources of data when it comes to future success. And the most reliable source of information about past behavior comes from a candidate's references – people who have worked with the candidate in the past.

SkillSurvey Reference helps you obtain behavioral insights about a job candidate from managers, coworkers and direct reports, giving you many more data points on which to base your hiring decisions.

Our I/O psychologists conduct in-depth research for every job, including validity studies, government databases, job descriptions, and interviews with customers. They distill that research into a highly job-specific survey that helps recruiters and hiring managers measure critical behaviors associated with job success.

The SkillSurvey library contains hundreds of job-specific surveys that map to one of 3,000+ jobs in the workplace. (Finding the right survey is easy with on-line web enabled tools.) Individuals who have worked with the candidate in the past are asked to rate the candidate's competence on the job specific survey behaviors. Additionally, text boxes are provided so that references can provide open-ended comments on the candidate's work-related strengths and areas for improvement.

Feedback from multiple references is presented in a final report. Because each individual's feedback is kept confidential (the average of all references is provided and a summary of the comments), references are more likely to complete the survey and provide candid responses. And since it only takes a few minutes, most surveys are returned in 1 to 2 days. But we don't stop there. The ratings the candidate receives from references can be shown as a percentile and compared with ratings received by thousands of other candidates who have applied for the same or a very similar position.

Reliable, bias-free data can move your diversity efforts forward and open the door to a candidate who just might be the superstar your organization will need to thrive.

— Encourage a Culture of Inclusion

Soft skills—the attributes and attitudes that enable someone to effectively interact with others—are vitally important. This is especially true today, when incivility is on the rise.

But ask a few people to define soft skills and responses vary. Dependability? Maturity? Creativity?

Research has proven that proficiency in a short list of competency areas, which focus on soft skills, are the true predictors of success in almost every job.

The predictors include professionalism, interpersonal skills, problem solving and adaptability, as well as personal value commitment (more on that in a minute). For those who manage people or projects there are other predictors such as setting goals, assigning tasks, and providing feedback. For executives and leaders, predictors include the ability to set a course and motivate others.

Like any other skill, soft skills can be correlated to specific jobs. Hotel housekeeping staff must be able to remain calm when handling complaints from guests. A registered nurse should be able to convey complex information and offer emotional support. A business manager must be able to convey goals and timelines clearly and collaborate successfully with others.

We can all agree that these are important skills. But how do you determine if your candidate is really in possession of them? Trusting your gut—whether your assumptions are based on a candidate’s resume or a particularly good interview—isn’t enough.

Even traditional reference checking methods, like phone calls or emails, can fail to solicit precise information about the soft skills that will make a job candidate successful in a particular role. As well, traditional reference checks take time—often as long as three weeks. And many organizations that perform phone-based reference checks wait until the end of the hiring process – sometimes even after a conditional offer has been made.

For many organizations, particularly those pursuing diversity goals, a candidate’s personal commitment to fairness will be a critical measure.

For access to trustworthy data about a candidate’s soft skills, [a pre-hire reference tool like SkillSurvey Reference can be a game changer](#). With SkillSurvey Reference and its Pre-Hire 360 workflow, you can find the predictive insights you need to make better hires and build a culture of inclusion.

Unlike other pre-hire assessments, SkillSurvey Reference features a specific competency area focusing on a candidate’s attitude, respect for diversity, trustworthiness, and integrity. Those who have worked with the candidate in the past are asked to provide feedback on how well the candidate “treats co-workers, staff and others of different backgrounds, beliefs and gender with fairness, respect and sensitivity.”

That feedback sheds light on a candidate’s ability to work with people of all backgrounds. And it helps recruiters, staffing agencies, and hiring managers build a culture where inclusivity is embraced, and diversity is business-as-usual.

Conclusion

One of the most important responsibilities facing talent acquisition professionals and business leaders today is creating and promoting a diverse workforce. Pre-hire reference tools can provide high-quality data about candidates while eliminating the potential for bias, particularly protected classes like race, ethnicity, gender, and age.

Online tools like SkillSurvey Reference and the Pre-Hire 360 workflow can quickly and confidentially verify references and capture consistent, honest, and in-depth information about a candidate’s qualifications and background. You can reduce bias in hiring, open the door to a more culturally diverse workplace, and build a culture of inclusion across your organization to meet new challenges and seize new opportunities. This latest generation of reference checking technology raises talent selection to a new level of productivity, sophistication, ease, and compliance.