

# STAFFING **ADVISORS**

## HOW-TO GUIDE

# Leveling the Playing Field and Raising the Bar



# What Now?

As many organizations strip DEI language from their websites and job ads, HR leaders are left wondering: What now?

Instead of searching for the right words, focus on the right actions.

You can still implement equitable, evidence-based hiring practices that reliably predict success on the job without crossing boundaries into “illegal” DEI. In employment lawyer and author Heather Bussing’s words, “It’s not illegal to welcome and include people no matter what they look like, where they come from, what they believe, who they love, whether they have disabilities, and what gender they are. It’s fair and just and American.”<sup>1</sup>

The research shows it’s also good business.

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## Diversity Isn't a Checkbox—It's an Advantage

Extensive research, including seminal work by Dr. Katherine W. Phillips of Columbia University, demonstrates the causal link between diversity and team and organizational performance.<sup>2</sup>

As she put it, “The key to understanding the positive influence of diversity is the concept of informational diversity. When people are brought together to solve problems in groups, they bring different information,

opinions and perspectives. Diversity jolts us into cognitive action in ways that homogeneity does not.”

At Staffing Advisors, we define diversity as perspectives your team doesn't already have (cognitive styles, industry experiences, educational backgrounds, political affiliations, international perspectives, or factors like race and gender). Diversity is proven to boost creativity, innovation, and financial growth.



**Companies with more than 30% women in leadership outperform financially. Ethnically diverse executive teams see a 27% financial advantage.**

(McKinsey)

**Companies with above-average diversity scores reported 45% of average revenue from innovation compared to 26% by companies with below-average diversity scores.**

(Boston Consulting Group)

**Diversity of thinking is a well-spring of creativity, enhancing innovation by 20%, and enabling groups to spot risks, reducing these by about 30%.**

(Deloitte)

There's no contest. For decades, organizations that have attracted diverse workforces have been outperforming those who don't. And Dr. Phillips's research proved that diversity itself helped to create that performance difference.

**Teams with a wide range of perspectives work harder and smarter, and that's what drives business results.**

# The Answer Has Been Here All Along

So, we know that diverse teams perform better—yet hiring still favors familiarity over skill. We build teams that act and think like each other and mistakenly filter out people who can spark innovation and growth.

Behavioral economists and researchers have clearly identified the patterns of behavior that create this dynamic:

- ⊗ We make hiring decisions on autopilot, drawn to the familiar while believing we're being objective.<sup>3</sup>
- ⊗ We think we're (much) better at evaluating talent and performance than we actually are.<sup>4</sup>
- ⊗ We keep using interview methods that have been debunked time and time again while insisting they work.<sup>5</sup>

If your marketing strategy isn't working, do you blame the customer? Of course not. So why do we blame the candidate when our recruiting approach fails to attract the best?

**It's time to address these patterns in hiring. If you want to change behavior and make it stick, you have to change the process first.**

Without using any banned words, you can enact a few small behavioral interventions to more predictably hire people from a range of backgrounds who will elevate your teams and drive real impact.

These same steps reduce bias and create a fairer hiring process for everyone. Bias, in this case, means factoring in anything that doesn't predict job success. And it's the biggest source of hiring error.

**Reduce that error, and you'll get better hiring—and business—results.**



## Check the Research

Read the Case for Competency-Driven Hiring for an in-depth look into the research behind this approach.

[!\[\]\(fe3aebe81acea8d45108cd2768939da7\_img.jpg\) The Case for Competency-Driven Hiring](#)



## Start Recruiting at the Performance Review

Most hiring mistakes happen before a job ad even goes live. That's because almost everyone skips this step.

**Before you post the job, sit down with key decision-makers and get clear on these details:**

- What tangible business results do you expect from this role? Be specific about performance expectations for the first one or two years. Think outcomes, not activities.
- How will you measure success? How will you know they've met expectations?
- What are the top priorities and common challenges of the role?
- What resources will your new hire have access to? What roadblocks will they need to navigate?

**Once you've defined the business impact, work back from that:**

- What are the most critical situations this person will need to handle to drive that impact?
- What are the 3-5 skills needed to succeed in those situations? What do they need to be really good at?

Full disclosure—this part isn't easy. Most people will default to talking about attributes like “team player” or “self-starter” because those are easier to name than actual skills. But attributes are subjective and nearly impossible to evaluate fairly.<sup>6</sup> Be ready to coach hiring managers through this step.



## Drop the Laundry List

Want to shrink your candidate pool and give yourself fewer options? Just pile on the “must-haves.” This is a mistake most hiring teams make.

Instead of searching for a candidate who ticks every item on your wish list (they don’t exist), focus on the 3-5 job-relevant skills you identified in step one. This starts in your job ad:

- **Be specific.** Skip the jargon and focus on the actual work they will do and the impact they will make. Vague is the enemy of good recruiting.
- **Set clear expectations.** Emphasize the 3-5 key skills and include metrics for success whenever possible.
- **Cut unnecessary qualifications.** Only require education, certifications, or industry experience if they’re truly necessary to do the job.
- **Challenge assumptions.** Ask yourself: “Is this requirement essential to do the work?” If not, move it to the “nice-to-have list”—or remove it entirely.
- **Make it stand out.** Review job postings for similar roles. If yours sounds just like everyone else’s, revise those general statements with information about initiatives, challenges, and opportunities unique to your organization.

This is how you can attract a greater number of highly qualified candidates from different backgrounds who actually meet your needs. Expanding options early on means you can be more selective when it counts. Top candidates are more likely to apply when they see you’ve put thought into the role and can envision themselves making an impact.

**Raise the standard of what it means to succeed by emphasizing critical skills rather than a rigid list of less important qualifications.**

[!\[\]\(a870788d6ed9b8fd294b7654a8c8526b\_img.jpg\) Read our Guide to Effective Advertising for more tips.](#)



## Be Rigorous (Later)

After more than 1,000 searches, we see the same thing happen: Hiring teams are toughest during resume review and then ease up as the process moves forward. *That's backward.* You want to be open-minded early on and increase rigor as candidates (and your team) become more invested.

If a candidate has 3 of the 5 key skills, let them into the funnel. They may have more than you realize once you talk to them. Only 8 years of experience? Let them in. Their 8 years may be stronger than someone else's 12. At this stage, you're looking for a "maybe yes," not a perfect match. You don't have enough data to know who's best yet.

**Resumes are just snapshots, not proof of ability.  
Terrific candidates sometimes have mediocre  
resumes. And the most impressive resumes can turn  
into disappointing interviews.**


Prime yourself to be open to different career paths. Look up 10-15 professionals in similar roles on LinkedIn. You'll see a mix of experience levels, education, and industries or sectors. Repeat this to yourself as you review resumes: "There are many ways to build experience and skills. Could this be one?"

Identify at least ten "maybe yes" candidates and schedule short calls. It's not a commitment—it's just a conversation. Some of the least conventional candidates will surprise you. Let them. Expand your options. Your interviews and work sample tests will help you narrow the group down based on real data.



### Challenge Assumptions

Faced with a stack of resumes on your desk, how do you decide who to interview?

 **Hire Better By Leaning Into the Skills Your Team Needs**



## Gather Data, Not Opinions

Real talk: interview feedback is usually very heavy on opinions and light on facts. Ask your team who the most skilled candidate was, and they'll usually pick the person they liked the most.

Here's what to do instead:

- Prepare a set of questions based on the 3-5 key skills you identified. Use them with every candidate.
- Frame the questions around specific challenges related to the actual work they will do.
- Ask strategic follow-up questions. The best candidates shine during follow-ups, while less effective candidates tend to lose confidence.
- Have interviewers provide feedback individually before debriefing as a team to avoid groupthink.

If you want real hiring accuracy, you need objective data, not gut feelings. Competency-based questions create a level playing field and help you compare candidates side by side on the skills needed to drive impact.

**Without structure, interviews drift into small talk and common ground. That's just how humans are wired. And it's how teams end up hiring people they like rather than people who can do the job best.**

### Predict Impact

The thing about interviews?  
They're only as effective as  
the preparation behind them.  
Generic interview questions  
rarely reveal whether candidates  
can truly deliver results.

 **Conducting Interviews That  
Actually Predict Impact**





## Do Some Work Together

If you change only one thing about your hiring process, make it this: Give every finalist a work sample test.

The first-round interview uncovers skills from the candidate's former work. The second round with a work sample test reveals the candidate's abilities *in your business context*. You need both to evaluate candidates objectively.

During the work sample discussion, candidates from unexpected backgrounds often rise to the top because they bring fresh perspectives to make you think differently about the work.

This is where you'll get your aha moment. Embrace it.

Hands down, the work sample is the best predictor of job success.<sup>7</sup> And it's where you turn the rigor dial all the way up.

- **Make it real.** Give finalists a work sample tied to an actual business challenge.
- **Match the stakes.** Align the complexity to what they'll handle in the role.
- **Go deeper.** Ask follow-ups to reveal how they think—add a roadblock or pivot to see how they adapt.

This isn't "free work." A well-designed work sample should take no more than 2-3 hours to complete. Tailor the exercise to the role, but don't ask candidates for presentations or polished deliverables. What you really want to know is how they think, and you get that from a discussion, not a slideshow.

**Every candidate has strengths. Some shine in writing, others in conversation. But the ones who truly drive impact always stand out in the work sample.**



### Hiring Magic

Done right, the work sample interview is hiring magic. It reveals skills, values, and working styles and shows you who will actually elevate your team.

[!\[\]\(4b7a79268f6ba26c1471d4232fffa85a\_img.jpg\) How Work Sample Tests Help You Hire Better](#)

## Post-DEI, We Can Still Hire Better Together

Hiring decisions shouldn't be made on gut feelings or outdated habits. When you strip away unnecessary requirements, focus on the skills that matter, and evaluate candidates with structured interviews and work sample tests, you level the playing field while raising the bar.

We empathize with employers who worry that these efforts could put them on shaky legal ground. Legal experts offer a clear distinction between lifting and leveling that you can use to think about this work. "Lifting up" underrepresented groups could be interpreted as illegal. But broadening your perspective about who can succeed in a role and ensuring every candidate is evaluated fairly and rigorously is well within the law.

At Staffing Advisors, we've followed this approach for twenty years (through tides of changing societal and political opinions around DEI) because it produces the best hiring results for our clients.

And we're not the only ones saying this. Experts agree that in a world where you can't say DEI, this is what works:

- ✓ "Talent identification focuses on measurable skills and performance, using skills-based assessments to eliminate biases and ensure decisions reflect true potential." — [SHRM's BEAM Framework](#)
- ✓ "Other research has found that standardizing hiring processes reduces hiring discrimination, developing competency criteria mitigates bias on promotions outcomes and feedback, designing the workday so people spend more time with others different from them lowers prejudice and increases belonging, and so on." — [Lily Zheng, Fairness, Access, Inclusion, and Representation Strategist, Author](#)
- ✓ "So what does a legally sound DEIA program actually look like? In hiring, this means broad recruitment efforts, structured interviews to minimize bias, and standardized evaluation criteria based on skills and experience." — [Jon Hyman, Labor and Employment Attorney](#)

**Competency-driven hiring is fairer, more inclusive, and helps you build a high-performing culture that sustains over time.**

Ready to make a change? Join us in our mission to transform hiring and build more effective teams, one hire at a time. If you need help or would like more information, [please reach out](#). We share these processes because we believe in better hiring, whether you're a client or not.

## References

- 1 [\*DEI Is Not Illegal\*](#), Heather Bussing, employment attorney and author
- 2 [\*How Diversity Makes Us Smarter\*](#), Katherine W. Phillips, former senior vice dean and professor of leadership and ethics at Columbia Business School
- 3 [\*Of 2 Minds: How Fast and Slow Thinking Shape Perception and Choice\*](#), Daniel Kahneman, Nobel Laureate in economics
- 4 [\*The Common Myths About Performance Reviews, Debunked\*](#), Professor of Management and Director of the Center for Human Resources at The Wharton School; *Most HR Data is Bad Data*, Marcus Buckingham, author and expert on talent and leadership
- 5 [\*How to Take the Bias Out of Interviews\*](#), Iris Bohnet, professor and co-director of the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard Kennedy School
- 6 [\*The Feedback Fallacy\*](#), Marcus Buckingham, author and expert on talent and leadership, and Ashley Goodall, author, consultant, and leadership expert
- 7 [\*Selecting Talent: The Upshot from 85 Years of Research\*](#), Bob Sutton, professor of management science at Stanford University

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