

# [ BIAS INTERRUPTERS ] *meritocracy now!*

## BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR HIRING & RECRUITING *Identifying Bias in Hiring Guide*

The four patterns below describe *tendencies not absolutes*. Here's what to watch out for:

**Prove-It-Again! ("PIA")** — Groups stereotyped as less competent often have to prove themselves over and over. "PIA groups" include women, people of color, individuals with disabilities,<sup>1</sup> older employees,<sup>2</sup> and first-generation professionals.<sup>3</sup> Research documents the following tendencies:

1. **Higher standards.** Despite identical resumes, a candidate who listed elite interests like tennis received 12 times more callbacks than one who signaled he was a first-gen professional.<sup>4</sup> "Jamal" needed 8 more years of experience to be considered as qualified as "Greg"<sup>5</sup>
2. **"He'll crush it;" "They aren't ready."** The dominant group\* judged on potential; PIA groups on what they've already accomplished.<sup>6</sup>
3. **Casuistry.** When a man had more experience but less education than women peers, people tended to choose the man on the grounds he had more experience. But when the man had more education but less experience, people again chose the man but shifted the rationale (now focusing on his education).<sup>7</sup>
4. **Elite school bias.** Over-reliance on elite educational credentials hurts first-generation professionals: almost half of Harvard students come from families in the top 4% of household incomes.<sup>8</sup> Top students from lower ranked schools are often as successful as students from elite schools—and stay longer.<sup>9</sup>
5. **PIA groups get horns; others a halo.** Horns=one weakness generalized into an overall negative rating. Halo=one strength generalized into a global positive rating.<sup>10</sup>
6. **"We applied the rule—until we didn't."** Objective requirements often are applied rigorously to PIA groups but leniently for the dominant group (or waived entirely).<sup>11</sup>
7. **Can only the superstars survive?** Superstars may escape PIA problems that affect others.<sup>12</sup>

**Tightrope** — A narrower range of workplace behavior often is accepted from women<sup>13</sup> and people of color<sup>14</sup> ("TR groups"). First-generation professionals and modest or introverted men can face Tightrope problems, too. Research documents the following tendencies:

1. **Leader or worker bee?** TR groups face pressure to be "worker bees" who work hard (but lack "leadership potential").<sup>15</sup>
2. **Modest, likeable, not ambitious.** Prescriptive stereotypes create pressures create pressures on TR groups to be modest, likeable team players—not ambitious go getters.<sup>16</sup>
3. **Direct and assertive—or angry and abrasive?** Competitive, assertive behavior and straight talk often is seen inappropriate in TR groups — "tactless," "abrasive," "difficult," "intimidating." Anger also is accepted more in some groups than others.<sup>17</sup>

4. **"She's a prima donna"; "He knows his own worth."** Self-promotion may be seen as off-putting in TR groups. Modest men may encounter assumptions they are both less competent and less manly. Groups raised with "modesty mandates"—first-generation professionals, people of Asian descent, and women—are disadvantaged by processes that require open self-promotion.<sup>18</sup>
5. **Racial stereotypes.** People of Asian descent are often stereotyped as passive and lacking in social skills; Black people as angry or too aggressive; Latinx people as hotheaded or emotional.<sup>19</sup>
6. **LGBTQ employees** may be stereotyped as "too feminine," "too masculine," or just "too gay."<sup>20</sup> These kinds of comments signal illegal discrimination federal (and often state) law.<sup>21</sup>

**The Parental Wall** can affect both mothers and fathers.

1. **"He has a family to support."** Fathers face expectations that they will not (or should not) take time off for caregiving—or be higher pay because they're breadwinners (though that's illegal).<sup>22</sup>
2. **"Gaps in her resume."** People take time off for many reasons. Be consistent. If you don't penalize for military service, don't do so for taking time off for children either.<sup>23</sup>
3. **"Her priorities lie elsewhere" (or should).** Mothers are stereotyped as less competent and committed and are 79% less likely to be hired than identical candidates without children.<sup>24</sup>
4. **"I worry about her children."** Mothers with high-powered careers tend to be disliked and held to higher performance standards.<sup>25</sup>

**Tug of War** — Dominant groups benefit from in-group favoritism; others often don't.<sup>26</sup>

1. **Tokenism.** If people feel there's only one slot per group for a prized position, group members may be pitted against each other to get it.<sup>27</sup>
2. **Strategic distancing.** People may be reluctant to advocate for a member of their own group for fear it will be seen as favoritism.
3. **Passthroughs. PIA:** PIA groups may hold members of their own group to higher standards because, "That's what it takes to succeed here." **Tightrope:** Women may fault each other for being too masculine—or too feminine. People of color may fault each other for being "too white"—or not "white" enough.<sup>28</sup> **Parental wall:** Parents may fault each other for handling parenthood wrong—taking too much time off (or too little).<sup>29</sup>

### Ten Powerful Bias Interrupters

1. Decide in advance what competencies are important for the job and rate each candidate competency by competency. Then average the ratings to identify the highest ranked candidates.
3. Keep track of referrals; if one group predominates, reach out proactively to other groups.
4. Hire candidates from multi-tier schools, not just elite institutions.
5. Make sure to give everyone—or no one—the benefit of the doubt.
6. If you waive job requirements, do so consistently and require an explanation.
7. Don't insist on likeability, modesty, or deference from some but not others.
8. Don't make assumptions about what mothers—or fathers—want or are able to do.
9. Don't count "gaps in a resume" against someone without a good reason for doing so.
9. Don't use "culture fit" without a clear definition of specific work-relevant qualities—and keep track to ensure such concepts aren't artificially advantaging one group.

\* Who is the dominant group in your workplace? Look at which group predominates in the company's top positions.

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