Scoping Great Talent In

Equitable Search Practices© in
Executive Hiring

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To increase representation at the leadership levels, there needs to be a fundamental change to the process organizations use to source and hire people.

What if, instead of ruling candidates out of the running for a role because of a few qualifications they didn't meet, we thought about what differentiated value each candidate would add to our team? Rather than treating hiring as a process of elimination, we would approach it as a way to scope in great talent that brings new perspectives and additive skillsets to the team.

Based on years of experience helping organizations diversify their executive ranks, Russell Reynolds Associates has developed a process to bring greater equity to the executive hiring process and focus on scoping great talent in. Our established Equitable Search Practices© comprise seven key practices that nest within the existing hiring process and are designed to eliminate bias and widen the aperture through which we view talent.

In this guide, we expand on how to adopt a more expansive view of what great talent is by thinking about how a new hire can add value. Going beyond a team's present strengths and beyond the checklist of experiential requirements, we spotlight the essential benefits of adding a diverse point of view.

To achieve this, we need to start by embedding Equitable Search Practices© which will guard against bias and help us improve diversity while creating a platform to pursue the aspiration of scoping great talent in. Equity is about acknowledging that we all have unique starting points that influence the direction we take and our ability to access opportunities in equal measure.

Actively seeking to identify and correct processes and frameworks that unduly disadvantage certain individuals or groups becomes critical to ensuring an equitable approach and in turn activating opportunities for diverse talent groups to progress.

The Equitable Search Practices© outlined in this paper:

The State of Organizational Diversity

The current talent pipeline structure—in which representation of women, racial, and ethnic minorities (among other underrepresented groups) drastically decreased at each level—makes is difficult for organizations to make quick progress on diverse representation at the senior-most level.

While many organizations have made notable investments in diversifying their entry-level hiring efforts, lagging representation of women and ethnic monitories in senior leadership positions persists around the world. Few of the world's largest corporations are run by women.[1] Among the Fortune 1000, women comprised just 7.3% of CEO roles in 2021.[2] Research in the US shows that it could be almost a century before the gaps in representation of ethnic minorities at the management level are closed, and that projection is only true if senior leaders address the systemic cultural issues that hinder diverse professionals to progress up the career ladder.[1]

Mercer's analysis of 1000 companies across the world found that women's representation decreases at every level, from comprising 42% of professionals, to 29% of senior managers, and just 23% of executive leaders.[3] Meanwhile, women held just 20 percent of board seats worldwide in 2020.[4] Recent research by McKinsey & Company about the US labour market found that companies are succeeding at hiring Black and Latino workers in the USA at the entry-level, to the point that Blacks and Latino workers are overrepresented relative to the population at that level. However, while the share of black workers at the entry-level is 19%, at the VP and SVP level they make up just 5%. The same is true for Latinos where representation falls from 18% at the entry-level to 8% at the VP and SVP level[1].

Both conscious and unconscious bias are substantial contributing factors to this enduring problem. Recent Russell Reynolds research, Divides and Dividends: Leadership Actions for a More Sustainable Future, found that C-suite leaders themselves are aware that there is a problem with bias and favouritism: 63% agree that leaders in their company show a bias or favoritism towards employees who are like themselves, and 62% agree that it is easier for individuals of certain ethnicities or backgrounds to get promoted than others, regardless of their capability and performance.
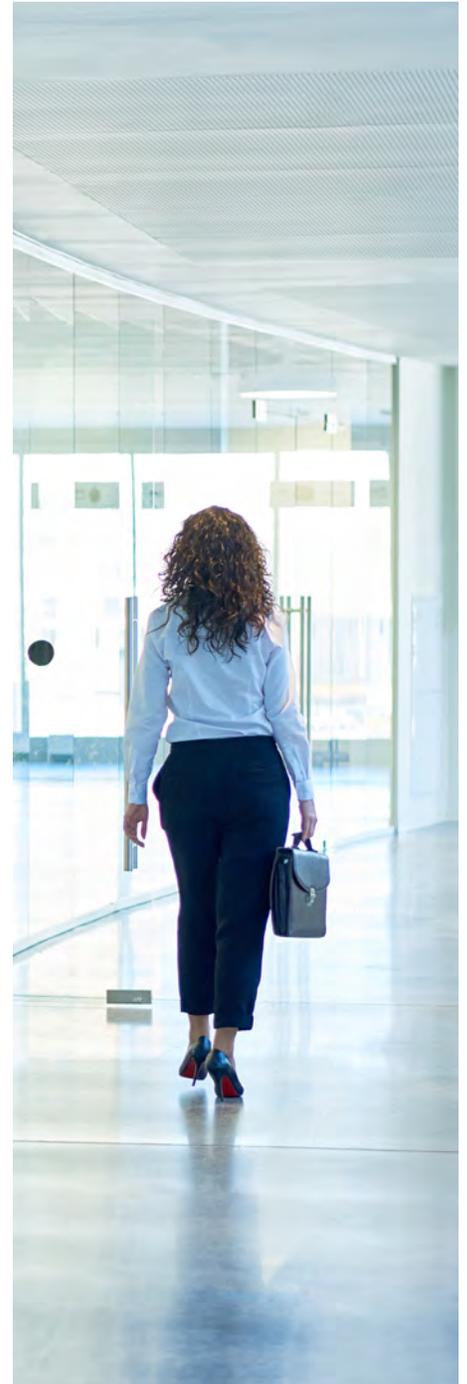
Diversify talent pipelines

When an organization scopes great talent in, they are tapping into the value-added skills and experiences that different people bring to the table when facing critical business challenges, mitigating potential blind spots, and missed opportunities due to groupthink. A diverse talent pipeline matters because it ensures that every executive candidate slate can include skilled talent that reflects an organization's employee base, as well as the increasingly global customers and communities they serve. Organizations that embrace diversity, especially in the leadership ranks benefit from better decision making and more dynamic and divergent thinking. That in turn positions them to better engage with the complex and unpredictable forces that organizations must weather to succeed. In addition, making diversity and equity a priority in hiring and in a company's culture, contributes to executive retention, innovation and creativity, and a positive brand reputation in a market of increasingly diverse suppliers and global customers.[5]

In a recent survey of executives conducted by Russell Reynolds, 69% of global executives said that they had made diversity a core criterion to the hiring process for the team they manage. At this point, it is rare that an organization does not agree with the benefits of greater diversity. However, many are not sure where to begin when it comes to creating a sustainable diverse talent pipeline.

Organizations will need to effectively and sensitively walk the tight rope between taking tangible action to increase representation that has historically been missing, and ensure these efforts are done with thought and care so as to avoid tokenism. Ultimately, no candidate wants to be a "diversity hire," or a person slotted into a role to fill a quota based on their gender, race, or ethnicity, rather than their values, skills, or expertise. In fact, top candidates will avoid organizations where they feel as though their social identity is the primary reason for their placement. In conversations [Russell Reynolds held this past year with women on boards](#), one director said, "I bring different perspectives and judgments within the board, resulting in better offerings to and for the public, as well as in better organizational

management. I trust that true diversity can be ensured when people overcome bias not only by gender but also by many factors such as age, social background, or experience. My goal is to be valued not because I am a woman, but because I contribute as an individual who happens to be a woman." As such, it is important for organizations to proactively develop a track record of placing value on underrepresented talent for the breadth of thinking they can contribute, which in turn enables these organizations to become talent magnets.

All organizations must start somewhere, and a good place to do so is being well-intentioned and vocal about the value of having more underrepresented executives join their leadership. Being honest and vulnerable about the mistakes of the past and having a strategic point of view on why diverse thinking, skills, and experiences are critical to the business are essential pre-hiring exercises. It's okay for companies to be open about their current gaps and therefore set aspirational goals, but they need to be able to justify those goals in a way that focuses in on the value and advantage of diversity, rather than the need to simply shift the make-up of their organization.

Organizations seeking to diversify their talent pipeline can ask themselves:

- Do our efforts to engage with talent networks extend beyond our own personal networks? Have we endeavored to connect with business and/or social networks outside of our organization that serve underrepresented executive populations?
- Are we making efforts to establish authentic relationships with diverse leaders in our industry, even if they are not currently searching for a role?
- Have we considered approaching talented executives whose primary experiences may be outside of our immediate industry but who still demonstrate a reputation for having shared values, business objectives and transferable core skills?

Create a diverse hiring team

Diverse teams are proven to make better decisions because they bring a broader perspective to the mix, push each other to step out of the comfort zone, and hold each other more accountable to following through on commitments.[5] This is true in all aspects of the way modern organizations operate, all the way up to the board level.

In our recent research about [the importance of diversity to the boards' effectiveness](), one director reflected, "When you don't have the opportunity to share different views, you don't come to good conclusions. A good board is collective wisdom, and the best boards are demonstrations of that, with no towering figure and a willingness and respectfulness to listen to other points of view. That's the value a board gets from diversity." This team dynamic and the benefits of diversity are similarly important when scoping great talent into an executive hiring process that aims to consider a broader swath of candidates with unique and perhaps unfamiliar backgrounds than may have been considered in hiring processes in the past. It's not a simple matter of adding more members to the hiring team. Organizations must be thoughtful and intentional in what role each member plays and the distinct value they can add to the hiring process with their perspective.

Diverse hiring teams also serve to represent the diversity in an organization more fully, which in turn can attract more top candidates to the open position and demonstrate the organizations' credibility and commitment to diversity and equity. A diverse hiring team also helps to mitigate the potential for affinity (or similarity) biases from influencing decisions about whether or not to advance a particular candidate. With hiring teams made up of stylistic, experiential, and social diversity, the group is better able to objectively assess candidate potential and can keep each other accountable for decisions that are outside of objective criteria. Russell Reynolds Associates' [recent research among Black technology professionals]() revealed that the diversity of the hiring and interviewing team was at least moderately important to nearly 80% of the professionals when evaluating a new organization for a role.

Organizations seeking to diversify their hiring teams can ask themselves:

- Is our hiring team sufficiently diverse in the broadest sense (in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, or other contextually important social identities, as well as levels of seniority and functional area) to demonstrate our organization's commitment to DE&I to the best candidates?
- Does each person on our hiring team bring a different vantage point or capability (e.g. assessing technical skills, assessing soft skills, assessing values alignment) to the hiring decision?
- Are there executives in other functions, lines of business, or companies within the group that we can invite to join our hiring team to better tap into the benefits of a diverse hiring team?
- Who do we know that can make strategic introductions to diverse leadership that may be retired, more junior, or outside of the immediate networks of our current hiring team members?

Set aspirational goals around representation and monitoring candidate demographics

Arguably one of the most important elements of scoping great diverse talent into the executive hiring process is having a handle on monitoring demographics throughout the hiring process. But before any hiring begins, this first requires the organization to take stock of the current make-up of their internal team and how well it reflects the environment surrounding the organization.

Missing this crucial first step leads to organizations setting goals or aspirations that are not relevant to their context and therefore risk exposure to scrutiny by employees and prospects, who fail to see genuine intention and rationale. Russell Reynold's research into the operating models of organizations with successul DE&I functions found that having a reporting mechanism and tracking demographics were both crucial. Once the current state is fully established, the organization can more accurately consider goals for the talent needed.

We define diversity as a representation of human difference, which can be in the form of more visible forms of social identities as well as less visible stylistic, cognitive, and experiential differences. As a starting point, Russell Reynolds recommends that all hiring processes aim for slate parity based on relevant aspirational benchmark populations (workforce, local communities, clients and customers). Next, organizations should be deliberate and sensitive to setting goals around the desired percentage for racial and ethnic diversity that is reflective of the local population. In some regions, where racial or ethnic diversity is not the most prevalent diversity issue, organizations should turn their attention to other prominent social groups that are lagging in representation. While demographic diversity is critical, diversity of thought, function, and technical experience are also essential in enriching a team's collective potential. The process for establishing these aspirational goals must be transparent and rooted in objective data to garner buy-in across the organization so that they will be accepted and championed effectively.

Capturing and reporting on demographic data to show candidate pool diveristy is critical in ensuring a lens on diversity throughout the search process. What's more, by setting up demographic data collection and reporting processes, organizations can ensure they remain on top of potential gaps in their hiring and can course-correct as required. Demographic data capture should not be used to track individual candidates or to show a preference for a particular candidate because of the identity they hold. Instead, aggregate reporting can empower organizations to make more concerted efforts to ensure they are not leaving critical talent groups out or risk losing sight of their representation goals.

Of course, in every country, local laws dictate how demographic information can be collected and used in hiring processes and these must be followed.

Organizations seeking to monitor their hiring demographics can ask themselves:

- Have we established what our executive diversity looks like currently and what the ultimate diversity goals we want to work towards are?
- Do our diversity hiring goals reflect the diversity of the local community, customers or clients, suppliers that we work with, and the communities that our organization serves?
- Have we effectively set up processes that allow us to track and monitor the diversity of our candidate pool in a way that is sensitive to local data protection laws and maintains individual anonymity?

Interview for competencies and assessing values alignment

To bring equity to the interview process, steps should be taken to avoid the bias towards candidates that are most familiar to us. This bias can be in terms of their personal background, as we tend to more easily connect with people who hold similar identities or experiences to ourselves.[6] The same is also true of professional background, as we can set unnecessarily stringent criteria for past experience, titles and companies worked for that may put some diverse candidates at a disadvantage. Applying Equitable Search Practices© lessens the propensity for bias to creep into the process by intentionally seeking people with additive skillsets and different perspectives to round-out the strength of the team.

To evaluate professional readiness for the role, the hiring team should pre-establish the core competencies for a particular role (as opposed to nice to haves) and set a standardized framework for how to assess that each candidate can objectively demonstrate those requirements. Candidates judged on their potential, such as bringing diverse points of view to address current blind spots or problem-solving challenges in unique ways, can enable wider pools of talent to be considered that may otherwise have been penalized by an overly prescriptive proven skills assessment. Russell Reynolds uses the Leadership Span framework to objectively assess leadership readiness.

The lagging diversity at the executive level and in the pipeline requires us to engage in more creative approaches for sourcing and assessing talent. For many underrepresented groups, their missing presence has largely been down to challenges navigating a corporate environment that has not always been designed for them. As such, diverse candidates may come from previous roles that are not as senior or seemingly missing specific experiences that are usually sought for executive positions. However, analogous or relevant capability can be strengthened through other avenues; likewise, a technical capability deficit can be overcome if that capability is already contained in the team. Taking this step may even help uncover less obvious, yet qualified, candidates.

Assessing for "culture fit" is common practice but can lead to unconscious bias in selecting like-minded and like-styled individuals, fostering a homogenous organization and culture. The broader objective of "culture fit" should be about alignment to organizational values and mission. Unfortunately, it is easily confused with affinity and likability on the part of interviewers and thus highly subjective and laden with personal biases.

To overcome this problem of affinity bias, organizations need to define what their critical values are and connect back to the organizations mission. Candidates can then be evaluated against values rather than the vague concept of "culture fit." Values guide a company's actions, can be assessed objectively, and shape company culture by influencing the actions of everyone who subscribes to those values. Most originations have developed and formalized their core values, often spanning a mix of preferred internal working styles, such as 'collaboration;' desired practices, such as 'inclusion;' and external-facing priorities such as 'client centricity.' Although ambitious and aspirational, values are both intentions and expectations a company holds for itself and its people. Assessing for values alignment can include creating interview questions that take an organization's established values into account. For example, if collaboration is a core value, an employer can gauge what collaboration means for a candidate, how they have interpreted and applied that value in their former experiences, and where they see an opportunity to bring collaboration into the role further.

Organizations seeking to objectively assess candidates can ask themselves:

- What does good look like for this role? What are the key competencies required for this role and what skills and capabilities do we believe the person filling the role should possess in order to drive success against core objectives?
- Do we have a structured interview guide and scoring system to support our interviewers to objectively assess the potential of candidates?
- Have we educated and aligned our hiring team on the difference between values fit and a culture fit, and have we prepared each person to talk about our organization's values with candidates?

Additional considerations

Intentional onboarding

Strong onboarding assures employees that they are valued and will be equipped with tools, knowledge, and support to succeed in their new role. Whilst bringing diverse talent into an organization is a critical and tangible step in the right direction, it's only just half the effort. Being thoughtful and intentional about onboarding lays the foundations for those early experiences of inclusion, which can be integral to solidifying early engagement and influences long-term retention for new talent.

Tips:

- Make strategic introductions during the interview process between the candidate and people who might be able to offer a common perspective on their experience at your organization.

- Have an onboarding guide and schedule ready that includes introducing the successful candidate to those with a similar experience and other resources such as employee resource groups.

- Formally assign a sponsor, to ensure a consistent touchpoint with a senior leader who will actively help to raise the profile and visibility of new talent.

Debiasing communications

Aim to use neutral and inclusive language when writing job specifications and throughout your communications to the candidate. This practice can help lower barriers to entry for diverse talent groups and attracts a broader range of candidates.

Tips:

- Common biased language refers to candidates as he/she instead of "they," or over indexes on adjectives that have stereotypically been associated as "masculine" or "feminine" (such as "competitive" or "relentless" used to describe work environments that have greater appeal for men).

- Sense check the relevance and inclusivity of your job specs by seeking input and feedback from mixed focus groups, or soliciting input from employee resource groups that represent specific underrepresented groups.

Our guidance on scoping great talent in

To achieve the vision of scoping great talent in, these Equitable Search Practices© provide tangible actions for leaders and hiring teams that aim to transform their executive hiring processes from a process of eliminations to a process of hiring talent with added value. We encourage leaders to consider integrating these recommendations in a manner that is contextually relevant and specifically tailored to their organization's goals.

Diversify talent pipelines	Mitigate blind spots, reduce group think and become future ready by scoping out your talent needs and sourcing dynamic, socially, and stylistically diverse, and skilled talent that reflects the ecosystem of the organization and beyond.
Create a diverse hiring team	Overcome bias and identify great talent amongst non-obvious candidates by cultivating hiring teams with diverse perspective that can help challenge thinking.
Set aspirational representation goals and monitor candidate demographics	Enable your hiring teams to have a clear sense of the gaps and missing identities and perspectives sought from candidates by setting diversity goals against the gaps of the current make-up of the internal team and how well it reflects the ecosystem of the larger organization.
Interview for competencies	To evaluate professional readiness for a role, hiring teams should pre-establish the core competencies (rather than solely focus on roles and titles) for a particular role and set a standardized framework for how to assess that each candidate can objectively demonstrate those requirements.
Assess 'fit' based on values alignment	Values are pre-determined by an organization and thus can be assessed objectively in prospective talent. Evaluate candidates on their shared values with the organization, instead of their 'natural' culture fit.
Debias the language used in communications	Attract a broader range of candidates and ensure viable talent are not excluded from opportunities by applying neutral and inclusive language when writing job specifications and sending communications.
Intentional Onboarding	Design a thoughtful onboarding plan that assures employees that they are valued and will be equipped with tools, knowledge, and support to succeed in their new role. This in turn can solidifying early engagement and influences long-term retention for new talent.

These Equitable Search Practices© help to shift the processes and systemic practices that surround recruitment and hiring efforts in aid of ensuring that all specific talent groups are not unintentionally excluded. Whilst these efforts are critical, they may be in vain if bias (both in terms of mindset and behavior) is left unaddressed. Talent and HR teams, together with hiring managers, should critically reflect on the assumptions that surround what 'good' looks like in the organization and what types of talent they are drawn to. They may ask themselves what skills, experiences, backgrounds, or types of talent the organization values most highly, as well as if any of that is rooted in what is formally considered success at the company. They may also get input from focus groups that represents different demographics, functions, roles, levels in the organization that can help to provide an outside in perspective. This may reveal answers about what types of opportunities their ongoing assumptions enable, as well as what types of barriers they create for expanding a diverse talent pipeline. An honest and critical conversation like this can result in unearthing some common biases and turning those biases into watch-outs for hiring teams.

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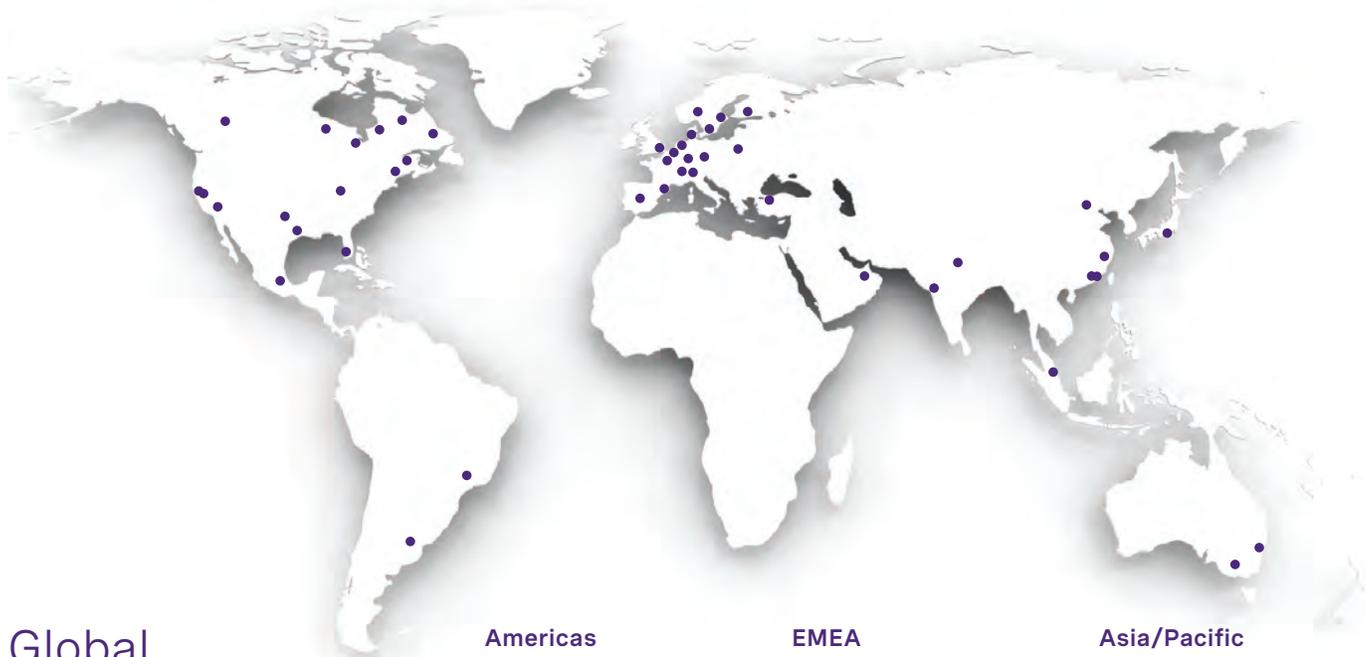
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