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DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION

The Recruiter's Guide to Inclusive Language

May 18, 2021 - Cat DiStasio

We often discuss diversity and inclusion in the same breath and, while the two have a close relationship, they are very different things. **Diverse organizations hire people with different traits and characteristics**, but having a diverse workforce doesn't automatically translate into an inclusive culture.

Inclusion refers to the behaviors and social norms in an organization that make people feel welcome, regardless of their differences. Talent acquisition teams play an important role in helping an organization build an inclusive work culture, and that often begins with the language used during recruiting.

Recruiters must understand and use inclusive language — that is, words that do not marginalize people because of their culture, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, socioeconomic status, appearance, or any other factor that shouldn't play a role in selecting the best candidate for the job. It's necessary to use inclusive language in all forms of communication with job seekers, from job descriptions and career site content to emails to conversations.

Here's a primer to help you get acquainted with inclusive language, some common mistakes to avoid, and suggestions on how to spot problematic language in your recruiting practices.

Key examples of inclusive language

Making your recruiting more inclusive starts by learning to recognize it. Interestingly, one of the easiest ways to make all forms of recruiting communication more inclusive is to keep it simple. Use straightforward language and focus on what actually matters to the job requirements. Avoid using jargon, slang and colloquialisms, which can all make people feel like outsiders.

A key strategy for making your recruiting more inclusive is to add language that attracts a broader scope of candidates. Highlighting compassion is one way to do this. In job postings and on your careers site, include information about flexible schedules, parental leave, adaptive workspaces, benefits for domestic partners, and other perks. In conversations with candidates, ask what are the most important factors in selecting their next employer, and address their questions by sharing what your organization offers.

Common mistakes to avoid

You want to avoid using exclusionary language in all your communication with candidates but the most important place to focus your attention is your first impressions. For most job seekers, this is a job description or posting, or materials on your careers site. Start by reviewing your current job postings and reworking problematic language to make your recruiting communication more inclusive.

1. **Avoid gendered pronouns.** The era of defaulting to 'he' when referring to your ideal candidate is over. Reword descriptions to use the neutral 'they' or direct your writing to your audience with 'you.' When talking with candidates, ask for their pronouns and use them whenever appropriate, instead of assuming their gender identity.

2. **Avoid other gender-coded language** in your job postings, such as rockstar, ninja, and unicorn. Many employers use these words to sound fun or exciting, but the net result could be that you alienate otherwise qualified candidates and they decide not to apply in the first place. Stick to straightforward language that describes the necessary skills and qualities of your ideal candidates.

3. **Avoid phrases like** "strong English-language skills" which may deter qualified non-native English speakers from applying. Again, this advice applies when these skills are not part of the essential job functions.

4. **Avoid dress code requirements that can exclude people** (i.e. "clean shaven" can exclude certain men based

on faith or gender non-conforming individuals).

Where to Look for Problematic Language

Show candidates you're serious about committing to inclusive language by auditing your current recruiting communication, materials, scripts, and conversations. Moving forward, use this list as a guide when creating new materials to ensure that your recruiting communications reflect your commitment to inclusivity.

1. **Careers website**
2. **Job descriptions** and **job listings** on your site and on job boards
3. **Social media posts** and **programmatic ads**
4. **Recruiting chatbot scripts**
5. **Recruiting conversations**

It's relatively easy to use inclusive language in your written communication, but it's more challenging to be consistent and inclusive in conversations. Even inclusive business leaders struggle to use inclusive language on a daily basis, according to Harvard Business Review research. Like those leaders, **everyone who interacts with candidates must learn about inclusive language, use it with colleagues and coworkers, and be willing to own up when they make a mistake.**

To support those efforts, there are a number of strategies to implement. **Writing standardized interview questions** for recruiters and hiring managers can help, provided interviewers understand the importance of sticking to the script. It's also key to train hiring managers on **diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices and laws**, since they may not have experience in that area.

It's also important to ensure that all of your candidate screeners and interviewers understand the **benefits of recruiting for potential and culture add, rather than looking for culture fit.** Too often, recruiting for culture 'fit' can translate into only hiring candidates who look and sound like everyone else in the organization, which doesn't support diversity or inclusion. Instead, TA teams should focus on what candidates can bring to the organization in terms of skill, experience, perspective, and attitude. Recruiting for culture add helps your organization build more diverse teams and embrace the benefits of their differences.

Inclusion Doesn't Happen Overnight

Committing to inclusive language and updating your recruiting communication is an important step but it doesn't mean your organization will become an inclusive workplace overnight. Just as diversifying your talent pipeline doesn't guarantee a more diverse workforce, using inclusive language is just one piece of the puzzle. TA teams can help set expectations, strengthen employer brand, and influence a more inclusive workplace culture by making conscious changes to recruiting communication. Together with other DEI strategies, employers can continue moving toward a more just, equitable world where people are valued for their contributions and potential regardless of their many and wonderful differences.
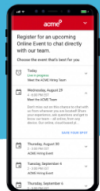
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