

Nudging bias out of the organization

Our Global Head of Talent Acquisition & Staffing talks about ongoing recruitment efforts to create a more diverse and inclusive organization.

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Novartis was recently recognized by the [Thomson Reuters iX Global Diversity and Inclusion Index](#) as one of the world's most diverse companies. But what exactly does it take to achieve this ranking? Among the many factors that contribute are the company's recruitment practices. We spoke with Paul Adang, Global Head of Talent Acquisition & Staffing at Novartis, about some of our ongoing recruitment efforts to create a more diverse and inclusive organization.

Q: Why is having a diverse and inclusive culture so important for a company like Novartis?

The world is diverse, and it is important to have a culture that reflects that. We serve patients around the world, of different nationalities, colors, religions and preferences.

We also employ over 120 000 people worldwide, many of whom have either been affected by serious illness or seen their families and friends become unwell – and we value the knowledge and experience they develop as a result. It is important to develop treatments that support us all.

To discover and develop medicines that help a diverse range of people, we need to be a place where people have respect for those with different opinions, who think differently. We don't just want to recognize these differences; we want to give people, wherever they come from, whoever they are and whatever they stand for, the freedom to be themselves. We want to create a safe place where no one will be judged about being who they are.

We not only need to welcome diversity and inclusion, but see them as strengths that help us to innovate and serve our patients. I firmly believe we only get the best out of our people if they can be who they are, not if they fit into a mold and hide their true selves.

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Q: Can you tell us about “unconscious bias” and some of the ways we are working to mitigate it?

Unconscious biases are stereotypes about gender, race, age, religion, etc. that are deeply ingrained and unintentionally influence behavior in all of us. It is something we all do, and some research suggests there is even a biological element to it: Cavemen were naturally (and perhaps rightly) wary of “others.” It is a natural defense mechanism – not good or bad, just a reality.

The goal for us is to acknowledge and break down these biases and help see the person behind the stereotype. But how do you get past the way people tend to naturally think? We are using insights from neuroscience and behavioral economics to offer approaches to mitigate unconscious bias. This includes

“nudges” – non-intrusive mental pushes that overcome bias and help the brain make more objective decisions. They promote more inclusive behaviors, systems and culture.

On top of that, we need to be more courageous about actively calling out bias. For example, in a team meeting, we need our associates to actively call out inappropriate remarks or general assumptions that define people by a generic factor, such as belonging to a religion or a nationality.

Q: How are we applying techniques to make our recruitment processes more objective and attractive to the right candidates?

First off, we’ve started training our recruiters specifically on unconscious bias management. We’ve trained 60 so far, with more to come, and we hope this is a first-line effort to remove bias from our staffing process. We also train our line management on unconscious bias. But it’s not only about training. It’s also about encouraging the recruiters to have an ongoing exchange about bias mitigation using proven nudges, and developing new ones.

Beyond that, we are leading some pilot projects to see how techniques like nudges can increase objectivity in how and who we recruit and eventually hire. One of our most important diversity goals is to increase the representation of women when hiring for senior positions. There is evidence that the wording style we use in job postings determines who applies; using certain words triggers more male applicants than female. So we are looking at an artificial intelligence (AI) tool that, for instance, scans job descriptions and job ads and makes them more neutral. With this kind of technology, we can develop job descriptions differently and help male and female applicants be more comfortable in applying for any role.

There is also research confirming that the chances of hiring a woman are higher if there are at least two women on the candidate slate. So we are looking at ways to get hiring managers to consider having more diversity on their teams, with a goal of eventually achieving a 50-50 ratio of male and female candidates.

At the same time, we are also asking hiring managers to build more diverse interview panels. Diversity within panels increases perspectives and mitigates groupthink – making decisions out of a desire for conformity rather than the best outcome – in the selection process. We are also recommending “silent brainstorming” as a way to obtain feedback on candidates from the interview panel. This method reduces the possibility of group decisions being skewed toward the opinion of the highest-ranking member or the perceived “most powerful” individual in the group.

Altogether, these kinds of efforts can help change the way we recruit and build a more diverse workforce for the future.

Q: Is there a specific example you can share?

We see nudges being effective in getting female candidates to accept jobs within our R&D organization. Beyond the standard information we supply, female candidates for lab head jobs were proactively informed about childcare and schooling options in Switzerland as part of the interview process. They were also provided opportunities to meet and speak with other mothers working at Novartis, our childcare advisors, nurseries, etc.

Beyond individual hires, one of the largest departments in our R&D organization has not only trained the majority of its hiring managers in unconscious bias and will continue to do so; it has also created a comprehensive approach to talent with inclusion and diversity at the center.

Q: What would eliminating bias mean for Novartis?

In the IT sector, only 16-19% of programmers with artificial intelligence knowledge are female. You might say, so what? However, if the AI coders working on our recruitment algorithms are predominantly male, will their unconscious bias slip into the algorithms? The same principle applies to our work in drug research and development. How might unconscious bias impact clinical trial design and patient recruitment? Eliminating bias is critical to building a more diverse and inclusive company, which more truly reflects the patient community we serve.

While we've come a long way as an industry, we still have a lot to do to systematically eliminate these biases in our recruitment and talent acquisition processes. There are already companies that do not let line managers handle the final selection of candidates, but rather use an independent committee that suggests someone to join your team. I don't know if we're ready for that yet, but our aspiration is to move down that path and minimize natural biases as much as we can in the future.

Find out what we're doing to eliminate bias and build a more diverse and inclusive organization.

Learn more about careers at Novartis

While our diverse workforce brings different people and perspectives together, inclusion is making the mix work. It is about creating an atmosphere and an environment where each of us feels valued, respected and heard.

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