



THE MOST  
COMMON  
COGNITIVE TRAPS  
IN INTERVIEWING  
AND HIRING

Babich & Associates  
214.823.9999  
[www.babich.com](http://www.babich.com)

E. 57th Street Partners  
214.823.6440  
[www.e57partners.com](http://www.e57partners.com)



**W**hether we are conscious of them or not, we all possess learned biases that color our decisions. Cognitive traps are common patterns of unbalanced thinking. They interfere with accuracy and most often involve jumping to conclusions without having any evidence. And, worst of all, we all get stuck in them! Beware of the following cognitive traps in interviewing and hiring.

**In order of the most common and potentially disastrous:**

**Systematic bias**—Making up one’s mind in a snap judgment, and valuing style over substance. As long ago as 1965 a McGill University study showed that most interviewers make up their mind to hire someone in the first four minutes of the interview! We aren’t surprised that this hasn’t changed one bit.

Psychologists have proven—and our own experience confirms—that in the interviewing process, candidates get evaluated on only a few real facts, and 90% of the hiring decision is made emotionally. It’s unfortunate, for instance, that candidates are most often initially evaluated by their image and physical attractiveness. Tall men- 6’2” or more, with what is considered to be a culturally attractive image and less than 45 or 46 years old will have an immediate advantage over guys not as physically attractive. Culturally attractive women, dressed appropriately, have an immediate advantage over others. An imbalanced height to weight ratio in a candidate, unfortunately, initially works against a candidate being fairly evaluated.

We could go on with many examples of systematic bias, but the point is to be aware of this bias. Any snap judgment of the candidate, for any reason, needs to be put in check. In fact, a systematic bias towards a particular candidate is all the more reason the candidate should be more carefully interviewed.



**Cognitive dissonance**—This is the excessive mental stress and discomfort experienced by an individual who holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values at the same time. “We want a Stanford MBA with 10 years of exceptional experience in what we do and we’ll pay up to \$60,000. It’s a great opportunity for someone.”

As professional recruiters, we encounter cognitive dissonance on a daily basis. We don’t hold people responsible for what they don’t know. Many companies hire so infrequently that hiring authorities may not even know how unrealistic their requests might be. Our business obligation is to point out this cognitive trap when we see it. Without our experienced, professional advice, hiring organizations can eventually come to the conclusion that they are trying to hire under contradictory beliefs.

At least two or three times a week we speak to a client company who explains to us that they have been trying to fill a position for a month to six weeks and can’t seem to find any qualified candidates. (A month ago, we even had a senior vice president from a California company tell us in all seriousness, with a straight face, “There are simply *no* good salespeople in Dallas.”) It usually turns out that cognitive dissonance occurs relative to the kind or amount of experience a company would like and what they are willing to pay or even their need to hire the kind of candidate that doesn’t exist...what we call a “purple squirrel” (a black, female mechanical engineer with a Spanish surname, an MBA from either an Ivy League school or Stanford, and with exactly 5.5 years of experience at studying temperatures over the past 10 years in Des Moines, Iowa and their relationship to anthropomorphic global warming.) Okay



. . . It's a bit of an exaggeration, but we often hear things that are almost as ridiculous.

How to solve cognitive dissonance in hiring? 1. Recognize that you have it, and 2. Ask a specialist how to resolve the dissonance.

**Attribution bias**—Assuming the candidate will be a poor employee based on one or two “wrong” answers in an interview . . . or assuming they will be a good employee based on one or two “right” answers. If there is any one piece of advice that threads through all of what we recommend here, it is to resist making a judgment about a candidate, either for better or worse, based on one, two or even three things that the candidate says in an interview.

This is, unfortunately, one of the most pervasive cognitive traps in the interviewing process. A candidate may answer one or two questions or make one or two statements and the hiring authority will jump to all kinds of conclusions about the candidate that may or may not be true.

We recently had a sales candidate who, after being through six qualifying interviews over one month with our client, was asked by the CEO in a final interview exactly who he would call on to get the quickest revenue once he was hired. The candidate thought about it for a minute and stated that he would call on some of the recent customers he had developed over the last three or four years. Most, but not all, of the customers had less than \$1 billion in revenue. The CEO immediately decided that the candidate should not be hired because the CEO only wanted customers that were \$1 billion in revenue or more. The company had interviewed 22 candidates to get this one to the



final interview. Four vice presidents or directors thought the guy's experience and abilities were stellar.

The CEO didn't seem to care or ask enough questions to discover that the candidate had spent the first 10 years of his career selling only to \$1 billion and larger organizations and was still selling to those folks. The question was, "Where would you go for the quickest revenue?" The candidate's answer didn't mean that he wasn't calling on or selling to \$1 billion companies or that he didn't know how to do it. He was simply telling the CEO who he would go after to get the quickest revenue. The CEO assumed his answer meant something that it didn't.

So how do we avoid the pitfalls of attribution bias? Get clarification on any assumptions that you might make. If one or two responses to your questions lead you to an assumption or specific belief, investigate that assumption or belief by delving deeper into the issue. We often make these kinds of assumptions after we mull over a candidate's answers following the interview. We jump to conclusions that are most often incorrect. Re-interview the candidate if necessary. Don't assume.

**Risk aversion**—Making a hiring decision more from fear of loss than possible gain, thereby hiring the safest candidate posing the least risk. We could write a whole book about all of the risk aversion we experience. The problem with risk aversion is that it's like predicting the future. If a client doesn't hire a candidate because they've had three jobs in three years, claiming that the candidate will most likely only stay for a year, there is no way of knowing if they are right. Since the candidate didn't get hired, there is no way of knowing if he or she would leave within a year.



Risk aversion is one of the most difficult factors for hiring authorities to deal with. The challenge lies in the fact that there is no candidate who isn't something of a risk. Every human being is a risk. So most hiring authorities will focus on *minimizing* the level of risk they're willing to take in just about any candidate.

The problem with this arises from hiring authorities beginning to focus more on what they *don't* want, allowing the fear of loss to outweigh the vision of gain. They become so concerned about avoiding risk that they miss the possibilities of success. Too often, this kind of thinking leads to hiring the "safest" candidate, the one with the fewest risks. But most often these folks are average producers.

The best way to deal with risk aversion is to recognize when it overpowers the balance between risk and reward. The key is to seriously evaluate the risk factors that each candidate presents and delve into them deeply enough to understand them thoroughly. For instance, to eliminate a candidate because he or she has had three jobs in three years, assuming that they will only be in their next position for one year is not a fair assessment. The *reasons* that a person has had three jobs in three years are really important. This is not to dismiss the warning signs presented by three jobs in three years as simply bad luck or poor business judgment, but it does mean to delve deeply into the reasons...not just from the candidate's point of view, but your own evaluation based on circumstances and deep reference checking.

Balance the risk factors with the possibilities of success. Just don't get overwhelmed by either one. No matter how stringent the hiring process evaluation, we never know how a



candidate is going to perform until they get on the job. Maybe the risk factors are substantial enough to carefully scrutinize the candidate's performance almost immediately should he or she be hired.

**Consensus**—Group think producing a risk adverse decision. This is one of the most amusing psychological traps hiring authorities can make. Consensus becomes more important than hiring the most qualified candidate. Whenever we hear the term, we automatically know that in spite of what anyone says, there are very few people who are willing to be decisive about a hire. Successful hires can be accomplished with consensus but its major purpose is to spread the risk and responsibility. Folks who get consensus rarely have the courage to admit they simply made a mistake in hiring. By getting consensus, folks can pass the buck around. They can always fall back on the excuse of, “Well, we all thought he was a great candidate.”

**Inattentive Blindness**—In interviewing, it is “blindness” to some of the candidate's assets or liabilities created by focusing on one or two overwhelming issues. An example would be missing a candidate's track record by focusing on their being out of work for six months.

You can download an article (*The Invisible Gorilla and Your Interviewing Skill*) from our website that illustrates this tendency. Inattentive blindness is one of the most common cognitive traps we observe. Interviewing authorities get hung up and focused on either something a candidate says, or the way they dress, or some small factoid in their background, or who they worked for and never get beyond the issue, preventing them from truly evaluating the candidate's abilities.



Here are some quotes we hear from hiring authorities when we know inattentive blindness has occurred:

“I just couldn’t get over the fact that he or she has never worked for anybody I’ve ever heard of.”

“Those glasses she was wearing were just plain weird . . . I kept wondering why you would wear something like that to an interview.”

“He must’ve gained a ton of weight, because the suit he had on was just way too small . . . I felt sorry for him.”

“How can anybody that short be successful?”

“All we talked about was how we both played football in college.”

Any issue that starts out with, “I couldn’t get over . . .” or “I couldn’t get around . . .” or “I was so distracted by . . .”

This cognitive trap can also work in the other direction when interviewing authorities are so “blinded” by one or two things a candidate has done in the past that they don’t evaluate the whole of the candidate’s track record and experience. It is evidenced by comments like:

“She graduated from the military academy 10 years ago, so she must be very disciplined.”

“He played in the NFL, so he must be competitive.”

“He or she worked at ABC company at the same time I did, and we compared notes.”

“She graduated cum laude from UT with a full academic scholarship, so she’s obviously really smart.”

Any single, outstandingly positive accomplishment that a candidate has can also “blind” us from digging deeply into the candidates experience or background. To overcome this tendency, both negatively and positively, we should disregard



whatever issue is causing the blindness and interview the candidate more thoroughly.

**Ironic rebound**—“*We don’t wanna make a mistake. We don’t wanna make a mistake. We don’t wanna make a mistake. We don’t wanna make a mistake,*” and then making one (i.e. don’t think of white elephants)! There are very few hiring authorities or companies that will ever admit the cognitive trap of ironic rebound. The trap causes more mistakes in hiring than practically any other. Here is what it sounds like:

“Well, the last two times we’ve hired for this position we’ve made some disastrous mistakes. So now here’s what we are going to do. We want somebody with a degree from a very good school, with no less than a 3.2 grade point average; we want to be sure they’re smart. We don’t want to make a mistake, so we’ve hired a psychologist, who has surveyed all of the people in the company and knows what kind of psychological ‘fit’ we need. The candidate is going to have to interview with her at least once and take the battery of tests that she has recommended. Because we made a mistake, and we didn’t have enough people involved in the interviewing process before, this person is going to have to interview with at least four managers and two peers... to make sure that we don’t make a mistake. We don’t care how long this takes and how many candidates we have to interview. We’re going to get this one right!”

“So, to start with we’ve hired an industry consultant to review all of the resumes and do the initial interviewing...so we don’t make a mistake.”

Okay, we will admit that this is a bit of an exaggeration, but it is exactly what ironic rebound sounds like. And then,



guess what- even if a candidate is hired, the odds of them being successful are no better or worse than they were by using the previous hiring process. Elongating the process, adding more people to the interviewing process, etc. *doesn't* make the process more successful.

One of the most recent examples of this was a client who made two perceived mistakes in hiring and subsequently came up with a convoluted hiring process almost as ridiculous as the ones stated above. It took three months to find the candidate they finally hired. (Even they got sick of their own process. Three of the managers admitted to us that it was downright stupid, but nobody had the courage to say it to their peers or the rest of the company.) Seven months after the candidate was hired, she came in and announced that her husband had been promoted by his company and they were moving to California. The immediate hiring authority called us. He was beside himself. He stated, "Even after all of what we did, we still made a mistake." We know, we know, you're saying to yourself, "Well how could that be a mistake. Just because she's moving to California doesn't mean it was a mistake to hire her." But common sense doesn't prevail with ironic rebound. Even though there was no way to predict that an employee would leave for reasons like this, our client still thought they made a mistake.

Now, there is nothing wrong with analyzing your interviewing and hiring process if you really decide that you made a hiring mistake. But going overboard creates just as much of a problem and doesn't ensure a better hire.

What is the best way to deal with ironic rebound in a hiring situation? Acknowledge that you just might make a mistake. That's right! Admit that even after all of the hiring disasters



you've made, you may make another one. That's it! Move on with the process.

Just pray that if indeed you make another mistake you recognize it soon and eliminate it quickly.

**Narcissistic nuance**—“Don't tell anyone, but we're trying to find the perfect candidate, in other words someone just like me!” Very few hiring authorities or managers will say this quite so bluntly, but they communicate it in more roundabout ways. The probability of finding someone “just like me” isn't very likely. Regardless of the fact that no one is “just like me,” waiting for them isn't practical and it does not mean they will be successful.

Most of us observe this kind of psychological disconnect in other people before we detect it in ourselves. Of course, it's always easy to see other people's sins and overlook the log in our own eye.

It's really easy to deal with this kind of cognitive trap. Simply analyze the hiring criteria you are using. If you can add the phrase “. . . just like me” after most of the requirements, you are practicing narcissistic nuance.

**Motivated reasoning**—Liking one or two things about a candidate and justifying hiring them without evaluating other issues or facts. Candidates are hired because of a few little things they do or say and the rest is emotional justification. A plethora of recent business and psychology books and articles by authors like Johna Lehrer, Leonard Mlodinow and Dan Ariely demonstrate that most business decisions are made subliminally, with more emotion than logic. Being liked or being remembered for one or a number of reasons often gets a candidate hired, or at



least, highly thought of.

There's certainly nothing wrong with thinking highly of a candidate for one or two reasons, but the key is to evaluate the candidate on more than just those one or two things. So, if you find yourself repeating that you like the candidate because of one overriding issue, start writing out all of the other reasons you like him or her. Set the one aside that is most prominent and think real hard about the other reasons.

As long as you are at it, write out all of the reasons that the candidate *shouldn't* be liked or hired. Be your own devil's advocate.

**Confirmation bias**—Favoring information that confirms a person's belief. This trap isn't far off from motivated reasoning. It manifests itself when a hiring authority decides that he or she really likes one or two things about a candidate and then comes up with many more to confirm the bias. The hiring authority knows they are doing this when they have to "think hard" about other reasons they like the candidate.

This occurs most often when a hiring authority and the candidate really hit it off personally. The hiring authority's attraction to the candidate overrides all other possible issues. The interviewer then looks for all kinds of things to confirm or rationalize why the candidate would make a good employee.

Now, it is really good if the hiring authority and the candidate like each other. But oftentimes, as we have discussed, the candidate being liked carries far too much weight in the hiring process. It should be a factor, but not the predominant factor. As one experienced, successful hiring authority states, "I'm not marrying them . . . I'm simply working with them."



**Getting candidates in the front door and losing them out the back**—Stringing the interviewing process out for too long, looking for a perfect candidate or the right number of candidates to choose from while losing the perfectly good candidates who were already interviewed and lost because the process has taken too long. *Paralysis by analysis!*

This may be less a psychological trap and more just a painful reality that causes companies to lose tremendous numbers of excellent candidates. Folks get so wrapped up in their interviewing and hiring process that they forget that the rest of the world doesn't operate on their timetable.

Our firm has experienced 10 major economic recessions since 1952. Here is our observation. During recessions, companies and the people in them worry about profitability and, in some cases, survival. They focus on their business one quarter at a time. The leaders squeeze more out of their employees and themselves, metaphorically putting one foot in front of the other. They are careful about costs and often watch revenues on a daily or weekly basis. They don't think about expanding their workforce. In fact, they cut back on personnel whenever they can.

When they have to hire someone, mostly as a replacement for someone who has left, they are careful about every detail. They implement a hiring process that includes multiple interviews, multiple layers of management in the interviewing process, group interviews, psychological testing, etc. all in the name of "being careful." Since there are plenty of candidates available during a recession, they can carry this process out for as long as they wish and still have plenty of quality candidates to choose from.



When the economy comes out of the recession, the leaders of these organizations can focus more on increasing profitability and expanding. Hiring picks up, and within a relatively short period of time, there are fewer quality candidates and they are finding new jobs more easily. Unfortunately, most companies keep the same interviewing process that they used during the recession- a cautious, elongated gauntlet of interviews, testing, etc. Now that they are growing, however, they really need to hire and do it quickly. But the interviewing process they have operated with is too lengthy and too slow, and within a relatively short period of time they discover that the candidates they like are able to go to work faster than their process will accommodate. On average, these organizations spend about a year losing candidates this way before they change their elongated hiring process to conform to the market.

As they get candidates in the front door, they lose them out the back door. In the beginning of their enlightenment to the post-recessionary job market, hiring authorities tell us things like, “We have our process, damn it, and we’re going to stick with it.” After they lose three or four good candidates because their process took too long, they gradually shorten it. Their life would be easier if they would keep their interviewing and hiring process streamlined regardless of economic conditions.

**Moram ad mortem**—Delay is deadly, time kills opportunities. See above!

**Corporate and personal procrastination**—Postponing or elongating interviewing and hiring processes from fear of making a mistake, avoiding personal responsibility, the desire to share risk, and because it’s simply easier to do other things.



This is an outgrowth of the fact that we discuss elsewhere, that managers in most every department are hired based on their ability to do a specific job or function. Rarely are they hired because of their ability to hire.

CEOs manage companies, CFOs manage accounting and finance, sales managers manage sales, engineering managers manage engineering, etc. Rarely is it the primary function of any manager to hire. Now, it may be part of their overall responsibility, but seldom if ever are the primary criteria for hiring a manager based on his or her ability to hire people.

Most folks really don't like hiring people. As we have discussed elsewhere, it's one of the biggest personal risks that we take in business. A "bad hire" is one of the most glaring mistakes we make. We can rewrite budgets that are miscalculated with low-level fanfare. We can redraw engineering drawings if they are incorrect without the whole company knowing it. But when we hire poorly, most everyone in the company knows it. It is extraordinarily painful. No one wants to hear from their boss, "How did *you* hire such a doofus? That guy (or gal) is an idiot. Do you know how stupid you look to everybody in this company? You're a doofus too, for hiring him (or her). What are *you* going to do to fix it?"

In an attempt to avoid this unpleasant syndrome, hiring authorities procrastinate when it comes to adding people and running the risk of making a mistake. They invent these long, drawn-out interviewing processes in order to make procrastination easier. They really don't like making these kinds of decisions, so they postpone them.

The way to overcome this trap is to set specific time goals for hiring. Streamline the process to no more than four face-to-face interviews within a 10 day period of time.



**Square One syndrome**—What happens as a result of corporate and personal procrastination? This psychological trap boils down to the fact that it's easier to start all over looking for candidates than it is to make a decision. The fact is that the interviewing process is not a risk in itself. It can go on for a very lengthy period of time before someone says "Wait a minute, this isn't getting us anywhere!"

Interviewing requires no long-term commitment. Rarely are we judged on our interviewing process. It requires no personal exposure to everyone's judgment. But hiring someone is a commitment. We've all known people who spend an inordinate amount of their lives dating other people. That's easy. But making a commitment to marry someone is a big risk. Some people never do it. The same is often true in interviewing and hiring. Interviewing, like dating, isn't much of a risk. But hiring is a commitment and a risk.

So, starting all over in the interviewing process, at square one, is really easy to do. Some hiring authorities and companies like it so well they keep coming back to it and use it as an excuse not to make a commitment to anybody.

The best way to avoid this trap is to realize that "square one" is simply a means to an end. Interviewing is useless unless someone is hired.

**Conscious override**—Overriding any red flags or risks about a candidate. "I know he has had all kinds of problems with keeping a job in the past, but 10 years ago . . ." "I'm the kind of manager that can resurrect about anybody as long as they try . . ." "Back in '48 we hired a guy like him and he turned out to be really good . . ." "It's not how far you fall; it's how high you



bounce. I know this gal has it in her.”

There is no perfect candidate and we all know that there are some risks in anyone we hire. But oftentimes we overlook the most grossly obvious issues that a candidate has because of our laziness about not wanting to interview other candidates, or our liking the candidate so much that we feel like they will be different once they’re working for us.

The key to overcoming conscious override is to simply be conscious of doing it.

**Emotional contagion**—“Everyone’s excited about this candidate!” The smooth, polished physically attractive candidate, who says the right things in an interview, who lights up the room when they walk in, who looks like they know what they’re doing even if they don’t get everyone excited. People think, “Man! This is exactly the kind of candidate we ought to be hiring,” after no more than five minutes into the interview. They get excited to the point that everyone else in the process is excited before the candidate even interviews with them.

We’ve all done this, and after six weeks, the candidate who got hired starts revealing his or her human characteristics. Sometimes we’re pleased, sometimes we’re not. The key to avoid this pitfall is to be aware that you are getting excited and think, “Slow down, let’s look a little deeper. Let me set aside my excitement and dig deeply into the candidate’s experience, background and performance.” There is nothing wrong with being emotionally energized about any candidate. We just need to look beyond the emotion of the moment.

**Paralysis bias**—It is easier to keep going through the interviewing process than it is to make a decision. Going through



an endless process can make it appear that management *is* taking action. It confuses activity with productivity.

We stated earlier that the interviewing process itself is not a risk. Hiring someone is a risk. Often we see companies postponing risk-taking by becoming paralyzed in the process of interviewing. We know this is taking place when we speak to a client and find out they have been looking to fill a position for six months and have interviewed 15 or 20 candidates and still can't find someone who is suitable. They've been through so many candidates that they wouldn't know a good one when they found him or her. They say things like, "Well, the last one or two people who we interviewed were pretty good, but the ones we interviewed in the beginning were better, and we didn't hire them, so there must be a reason we didn't, which means we shouldn't hire any one of the ones we've recently seen."

It's really interesting that there are certain organizations that get paralyzed this way every time they prepare to hire anyone. They love to tell themselves how hard they are working at interviewing. Again, the way to avoid this trap is simply to recognize it. It's not hard to spot and everyone knows when the company is doing it. Someone has to say "Enough!" and simply redesign the process.

**The Law of Recency**—"The last candidate I saw was the best." This trap occurs mostly when interviewing is carried out over a month or so. Most hiring authorities don't take good notes, and when interviewing is spread out over a long period of time they forget who they interviewed in the beginning. After a while, they are so tired of their own ineptitude that they subconsciously "like" the last candidate they saw. They are simply



tired of the process and have to get somebody hired, so they hire the last one they interviewed.

Recently, one of our clients was looking for their first regional salesperson in Texas. They are a startup software firm and their VP of Sales was eliminating candidates right and left, primarily because he thought they'd had too many jobs and not experienced enough tenure in the jobs they had held. The product is on the leading edge of technology and their compensation was excellent, so he felt like he could get the very best "A players" available. He is a very abrupt, direct and to-the-point kind of guy and would simply look at a resume and eliminate quality candidates right off the bat. If he saw one he did like, he would speak to them over the phone and, just as abruptly, eliminate most of them. He capriciously eliminated a number of very good, high-quality people. (He spoke with at least 15 candidates over the phone, eliminating 15 or 20 just by looking at their resume).

He made two trips to Dallas over a four-month period of time. But instead of interviewing a good number of candidates to allow plenty of choices, he would limit his recruiting visit to two or three candidates at most. His attitude seemed to be that since his company was so wonderful (and so was the VP!), everyone would want to work there. His face-to-face interviewing style was just as abrupt and aloof. He did try to make an offer to one candidate, but the candidate had a death in the family and decided he could not take the job. After missing his first deadline for hiring someone, he started over again. His second go-round didn't go much better. He came to town again, and after only interviewing three candidates, he eliminated all of them. He eventually quit returning our calls.



Three weeks later, one of our candidates called us and told us that he had gone to work for this company. The candidate had held two jobs in the last two years, with a two-year stint before that . . . not even in the software business . . . and three jobs for one year each before that. We asked him how he got the job and he told us that he had simply called the VP on a lead from a friend and then pushed himself through the interviewing process. Bluntly, the candidate didn't come anywhere close to the criteria that the company had been looking for. We really hope he's successful, but had his credentials been presented to the company in the beginning of the interviewing process he would certainly have been eliminated.

Voila . . . The Law of Recency demonstrated! The VP just got sick of interviewing and hired the next reasonable candidate who came along.

**The Halo effect**—The forming of an overall favorable impression of the candidate based on only one or two facts or perceptions (see Motivated Reasoning, Confirmation Bias, Systematic Bias, Narcissistic Nuance and Emotional Contagion above. The Halo effect has a little bit of all of them in it).

The difference with the halo effect is that it usually is centered on one issue of the candidate's experience or background. Many years ago we had a candidate who was a mechanical engineer. He was born and raised on a chicken farm in East Texas. Throughout the whole interviewing process, he would tell stories about being raised on a chicken farm, how hard he and his family had worked, how early he had to get up in the morning to feed the chickens, etc. His stories were wonderful and admittedly inspiring. As he went through the interviewing



process, every interviewing authority was impressed with the fact that he had been born and raised on a chicken farm. When they hired him, the hiring authority told us that the major difference between him and all of the other candidates was that he was . . . guess what? . . . born and raised on a chicken farm. That was the Halo effect at its finest.

**Relationship bias**—“I know someone who knows you and so you must be good.” This is one of the oddest traps we run into. It comes from what we call “relationship” buyers who think the only, in this case, qualified candidates they either know, or get recommended to them by someone they do know.

We hear more often than most hiring managers will ever admit, “I really only hire people who know someone I know. That way, I can get an honest reference about them,” as if they know the proverbial *everybody*. Objectively, no one knows *everybody*. None of us even know a small percentage of the people in our professions. And yet, the hiring managers who tell us this will say it with a straight face. We’ve even had some managers that have told us they don’t hire anyone unless they personally know them. They bring as many people as they can with them from companies they’ve worked with before. It may be a case of the devil you know versus the devil you don’t know, but they do it anyhow. We have represented managerial candidates whose staffs had previously followed them to new companies; when the same manager became our candidate they had trouble getting hired because our customer feared that if the candidate ever left, he or she would take their staff with them again.

This kind of psychological trap really has its limits. It isn’t



hard to overcome. These kinds of hiring authorities should simply remember a time when they didn't "know" other folks, carefully interview new and unfamiliar candidates, and compare.

**Canonization bias**—The canonization process is easier than the company's hiring process. And the two miracles are still required. This trap is the result of looking for the perfect, "saintly" candidate. The hiring authority and the organization are so worried about making a mistake that they look for Mr. or Ms. Perfect. As we stated before, those kinds of candidates rarely exist. Don't laugh about the miracles. We sometimes don't know which miracles are greater, the kind these hiring authorities expect a candidate to come up with in order to get the job, or getting the job itself.

**Organizational bias**—Assuming the candidate's quality is commensurate with your perception of the companies for which they've worked. This is a really big trap that many hiring authorities fall into. In fact, we hear it often, "Find us a candidate from such and such company." The company could be a competitor or some other organization that is perceived to have a good reputation.

We often hear a corresponding negative aspect to this same trap. "*Don't* send us anyone from such and such company." And that is generally followed by some kind of comment like, "No one we have ever hired from that company has worked out." Or, some other reason that is equally nonsensical.

Judging any candidate solely by who he or she has worked for is an error. The simple way to overcome this bias is to interview a candidate based on their personal experience and background. It is certainly reasonable to take into account who the person



has worked for, but to judge them solely on the places they have worked isn't fair to them and is especially unfair to you.

**Academic bias**—The tendency to favor one candidate over another based on their academic affiliations or GPA. Years ago we dealt with a major Fortune 100 company. They had an elaborate formula for determining who they would interview, let alone hire. One criterion was that the candidate must have graduated from college with a 3.8 grade point average. They were even more myopic by publishing a list of “lesser” schools from which, in order to be considered, the candidate must have graduated with a 4.0 GPA.

Not too many years ago we placed a candidate whose most outstanding attribute was that she graduated from the University of Texas with a 4.0 grade point average. Our client figured that she had to be extremely intelligent based on her GPA. Unfortunately, she only lasted six weeks on the job. As it turned out, she had no common sense at all. She had memorized and regurgitated rote knowledge at UT. High grade point averages don't necessarily mean that a person is intelligent.

We don't want to minimize high grade point averages. Most students who get them have to study hard, and we respect that. But a high grade point average doesn't always translate into business intelligence or common sense. It certainly doesn't hurt to take into account the candidate's previous GPA, but it shouldn't be the major factor in hiring.

**Performance bias**—*Assuming* that performance in one domain will predict performance in another. This is a very difficult bias to balance. On the one hand, most business leaders would claim that the best way to predict performance in the future



is to analyze performance in the past. And although we might agree with this for the most part, the ideas shouldn't be taken as absolutes. This can cut both ways.

We've had many candidates over the years who have been successful in certain types of environments, as members of very successful teams, or were simply put into just the right circumstances to perform well. We have also seen some very good candidates who, in certain circumstances, appeared to perform poorly but went on to be very successful in other organizations.

The key is in not making an *assumption*. This trap is very much like organizational bias. There is a tendency to think that the candidate is going to perform the same way in one place as they did in another. This is where it becomes important not to assume. To overcome this bias, it's important for a hiring authority to look not only at a candidate's previous performance, but also to get a very detailed understanding of exactly how the candidate achieved the performance. Not by just looking at the results, but finding out exactly how the candidate achieved the results.

For instance, a salesperson who was 110% of quota, but who worked in a team of four people to produce that result might not be as good a salesperson as another who performed at only 90% of their quota but was a "stand-alone" salesperson. An accountant with great performance reviews and maximum salary increases at one place may not be as good an accountant as one who receives marginal reviews and salary increases at another place. Their environments make a difference.

**Evaluation bias**—The tendency to rate candidates differently based on their race or gender. Now don't give me that "we



don't discriminate here" stuff. All hiring is discriminatory... some of the issues are legal and some are not. But every individual and every organization "discriminates."

The blunt truth is that minorities, and that includes women, are under more scrutiny than the average white male. Minorities have to demonstrate, on average, a stronger track record than other candidates in order to get hired. It doesn't necessarily mean that once hired the standards for measuring their performance would be different (although many times it is), but it does mean that they are scrutinized more carefully before they are hired.

Sometimes that scrutiny is a bias *toward* hiring the candidate because of their race or gender. It's not uncommon for us to hear from a hiring authority, "You know, this place is full of testosterone; we'd really love to see as many female candidates as we can." Or, "This place is so lily white; please try to find us a qualified minority." The female candidate or the minority candidate has an advantage in these situations. People could argue that there aren't enough of these kinds of opportunities, and that may be true, but this kind of bias should be checked.

Many of us feel that women and other minorities have to work harder than the average white guy in order to keep their jobs. There are some studies that support this, but they are usually centered on the "equal pay" argument. Equal pay is a different issue than how hard people work. Women and minorities are simply under more scrutiny than the average white male.

Arguing this issue is senseless. It is reality. Most of us find that it can work in our favor if we take our biases into account when interviewing candidates. The best way to approach this



trap is to simply accept it and factor it in the interviewing and hiring process.

It bears mentioning here that we are all subconsciously biased. Psychologists claim that we make snap judgments about the people we meet within two to thirty seconds after meeting them. Whether we like it or not, we are wired to make snap judgments. In 1998 a trio of researchers at the University of Washington introduced a computerized assessment called the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which has become one of the standard tools for measuring the degree to which an individual's unconscious mind categorizes people and automatically assigns certain traits to those categories.

Countless results of the IAT for all races, for instance, prove that a person's implicit biases and his or her explicit or conscious biases are quite different. The key is to recognize that our implicit biases need to be checked and verified based on individual personalities and individual attributes.

**Implicit personality theories**—If the candidate played team sports, they must be a team player. If the candidate excelled in individual sports, they must be good at working alone. People with low dominance don't make good salespeople. People with a high level of patience are good at tedious work. People with a high math aptitude are better at engineering and accounting.

We could go on and on, but we're sure you get the point. There are lots of implicit theories that are based on conjecture, like the one with team sports, and others that are proven out by psychological surveys. Psychological surveys that measure dominance or energy or persuasiveness are usually pretty accurate at assessing personalities. People with low dominance,



most of the time, don't make good salespeople. We deal with lots of organizations who use these personality surveys with reasonable accuracy.

Beyond personality surveys, though (and even they can be misleading), we need to be cautious about implicit theories. For instance, just because a candidate might have been an officer, even a high ranking officer, in the military doesn't necessarily mean that he or she would be an effective leader in a business organization. The kind of leadership that it takes to be successful in business is quite a bit different than the kind it takes to be a leader in the military.

The way to overcome this bias, as with many others, is to make no assumptions about the candidate. Trust but verify comes to mind.

**Implicit social theories**—"Single moms are often late or absent." This isn't far off from implicit personality theories; it just applies to social groups. Those groups could be racial or economic. "Poor folks have poor ways," or "people who go to Ivy League schools are born with a silver spoon in their mouth," or "people who are poor and have been receiving government entitlements are lazy," or "people who have been out of work for more than a year and living off unemployment insurance can't be very motivated" are the kind of implicit social theories we often hear.

We have a tendency to judge people positively if they are most like us. The further away from us they are, the more we scrutinize them. Similarities make us feel comfortable. Differences make us wary. This is especially true with social theories.

We like to think that in America we don't have as much of



a “caste system” as other countries. And while it is true that Americans seem more accepting of other cultures and other societies, we have to recognize the implicit social theories we carry around in our heads. Again, the way to deal with this bias is to stop, check our implicit prejudices and then move on to sound judgment.

**Devil’s advocate**—This is the staff member who never likes any candidate very much. That way, they’re always right. We run into this kind of situation more often than any group of people in the company would like to admit. Often, there is one person in the interviewing process who simply doesn’t like anyone, or on the other end of the spectrum, the same person makes a comment like, “Well, I guess this candidate is okay. He or she might be able to do a good job, but I’m not 100% convinced.”

The problem created by these people arises from their skepticism of any candidate’s ability to do the job, therefore always appearing to be right. If they put up a big enough stink, the candidate isn’t hired and they are proven right, because without a hire taking place no one will ever know if the candidate was any good. If the candidate is hired and this interviewing authority has communicated “Well, maybe . . . ,” and then the candidate turns out to be a rock star, the skeptic can always point to something less than perfect about the new hire. So, this interviewer is still right.

We’ve dealt with some companies who keep these skeptics in the interviewing loop but then don’t pay much attention to their opinion. Since they have a tendency to be negative, they may very well bring up valid concerns about the candidate that



others may have overlooked. In this case, the decision makers simply take into account the opinions of these naysayers and minimize their input.

**Attractiveness bias**—This is the unfortunate tendency to think that attractive people will be good employees regardless of qualifications. This is one of the most prominent traps that many hiring and interviewing authorities fall into. There is simply a tendency to like and trust people who are deemed by our social standards to be attractive. A candidate with a pretty or handsome face, a good height-to-weight ratio, an age of 30-to-45 years, and professional dress will generally have an advantage in at least the initial part of any interview.

Most of us don't want to admit it, but as the IAT proves, we innately trust or distrust people based on their facial features. Researchers in Princeton University's Department of Psychology found that faces with high inner eyebrows, pronounced cheekbones, and a wide chin struck people as trustworthy and likable. Faces with low inner brows, shallow cheekbones and a thin chin were considered less trustworthy and less likable.

We mentioned this before, but we dealt with a client a number of years ago who would only hire salespeople if they were 6'2" or taller. That eliminated most every woman and the majority of men. He sincerely believed that tall, attractive men were better salespeople than others. Ironically, he was only 5'8" tall himself, but he was absolutely captured by his bias.

Like with the other traps, simply recognizing that we have a tendency to be biased towards physical traits that society deems attractive is the first step. The key is to put these kinds of candidates under just as much scrutiny as others.



**Decision fatigue**—The deterioration of willpower after having to make many important decisions, or hiring the next candidate that comes along because everyone is tired of the process. This bias usually goes hand-in-hand with the Law of Recency mentioned above. In fact, the example that we give is exactly what happened. After four months of being unreasonably picky about whom he would interview, the hiring authority just got sick of the whole thing and hired the next person who came along.

Awareness that this might happen should be recognized at the beginning of the interviewing process. The greater the number of unnecessary people involved in the interviewing process, the more likely decision fatigue will take place. Lack of clear definition of the kind of candidate who should be hired is another major contributor. When hiring authorities start out by saying, “We really aren’t sure of what we are looking for, but the six of us will know it when we see it,” they are at the first step toward decision fatigue.

Another interesting, almost counter-intuitive step towards decision fatigue is beginning the interview process too *early*, well before the position needs to be filled. We often run into the situation where a hiring authority starts interviewing so prematurely that they lull themselves into thinking, “Well, we’ve got lots and lots of time before we need to hire someone, so we will just meander through the process with no sense of urgency, *because we’ve got lots of time.*”

If the client finds a good candidate for the job at the very beginning of the process, there is also a tendency to think, “We’ve got lots of time before we have to fill the job, so let’s see if we can find someone better.” Because they’re afraid to



hire someone immediately for a start date six weeks out, they meander through the interviewing process using the qualified candidate as a benchmark, thinking, “If we don’t find anyone better than him or her, we will simply go back and hire them.” Meanwhile, the candidate begins to think that the client can’t make a decision, loses faith in the possibility of getting the job, and, 60% of the time keeps looking and finds a job with an organization that communicates a higher sense of urgency. When the original company comes to their senses, they try to go back and hire the candidate they really liked in the beginning, only to find out the candidate has taken another job. Now they are back to square one. Decision fatigue has just been born.

What is interesting about decision fatigue is that when an organization falls prey to it, rarely does anyone have the courage to admit, “We just got sick of the process, everyone was bitching and moaning about it, so we hired the next candidate who came along.” How do you say, “The emperor has no clothes?”

The best way to avoid the decision fatigue bias is to recognize that it happens a lot, start interviewing reasonably in advance of the targeted hire date, involve only those people who need to be engaged in the interviewing process (no more than three, or four if you include the internal HR folks) and, above all, be decisive. Procrastination and indecision are the mother and father of decision fatigue.

**False memory and memory distortion**—Either remembering things that never really happened or remembering things totally differently than they actually were. Oh boy! We can’t tell



you the number of times we have debriefed two or three different hiring authorities in a company after they interviewed one of our candidates, only to be amazed by the different perceptions people have. It's almost as though they each interviewed a totally different candidate.

False memory and memory distortion occur through a number of the other biases mentioned here. Interviewing authorities, for instance, will get caught up in an attractiveness bias or an implicit personality bias or a conscious override bias and then start "remembering" the candidate through the lens of the bias they adopted. They "remember" the candidate's stellar performance in previous jobs because they really like the candidate and *want* to remember a stellar performance in previous jobs. They distort reality based on what they want to hear or think. Try getting two or three strong-willed hiring authorities who have adopted this bias to agree and a literal war can develop.

The best way to deal with this bias is for every interviewing or hiring authority to use the

Structured Interviewing Guide that we recommend and to take copious notes. Each interviewing authority needs to be sure that they have a very clear understanding of what the candidate has done, why they left previous positions, what their strengths and weaknesses are, etc. This bias occurs most often when interviewing authorities make assumptions and jump to conclusions without asking in-depth questions and getting clear-cut answers. Getting factual, in-depth answers to the interviewing questions as well as a very clear, concrete idea about the candidate's experience, performance, etc. is the key. "Can I compare this information with the information other people will get?" should be the question asked by every interviewing authority.



**Intelligent intuition**—An intuitive, gut feel that’s correct based on years of deliberate practice. This is one of the few biases that probably makes sense. It normally comes from highly experienced hiring authorities who have made enough bad hiring decisions to know what it feels like.

This bias works both for hiring certain candidates and not hiring certain candidates. These experienced hiring authorities simply “know.” They literally get a feeling in their stomach as to the wisdom of either hiring or not hiring a certain person.

What is interesting about this intuition is that when the very experienced hiring authorities get it, they aren’t overwhelmed with it. They don’t become fanatical about hiring or not hiring the candidate. They recognize that it is an intuition, not an absolute certainty. They’ll say things like, “My gut tells me that this person could be a pretty darn good employee.” They don’t go overboard and say, “I am absolutely certain, beyond a reasonable doubt, that this candidate will be a rock star.” They get a feeling, not a certainty. They’ve had enough experience to know that they could be wrong. They can probably even assign a percentage to tell how right or wrong they may be. They have just been around so long that they rely on their experience and intuition.

As we have explained, there are some hiring authorities said to get “happy ears.” They love every candidate they ever met and are absolutely, positively certain that the ones they want to hire are going to take the whole company to the next level. Then, as we have seen, there are the devil’s advocates who don’t like anybody and don’t think anyone is good enough to go to work for them. Those who operate with intelligent intuition recognize that what they get is just a feeling. They could be wrong and they know it. But they are willing to take



action on their intuition. If proven wrong, as when they make a bad hire, they act quickly to let that person go. Again, they follow their gut and do it quickly.

These people are usually experienced enough to avoid ruminating over the decisions they make. If the candidate turns out to be a great employee they are graceful about it and especially don't gloat or draw attention to their great decision. They merely take it in stride. Likewise, when they make a mistake in hiring and have to let the employee go, they do it quickly and gracefully with no agony or angst. They don't draw attention to their poor decision. They simply act and do the right thing.

Obviously, the best way to deal with intelligent intuition is to accept it for just what it is . . . an intuition. If a hiring authority hasn't had lots of experience in hiring and firing they should simply remember to evaluate their decision quickly, especially if they hire someone and subsequently don't get a good gut feel about the new hire's chances of success. Very experienced hiring authorities know exactly how to deal with this bias.

**A camel**—A horse designed (or hired) by a committee. You don't need much of an imagination to understand and appreciate this fact. We have made it very clear that hiring by "committee" leads to disaster.

**Productive paranoia in hiring**—Deliberately hire with your head *and* your gut. Realize that there is always the possibility of making a mistake. Deliberately and quickly fire your mistakes, following your gut. Productive paranoia is the formal attribute that experienced hiring authorities who follow their gut use in managing their new hire.

This is a positive cognitive bias. Most hiring authorities



don't like admitting that they might have made a mistake in hiring, so they overlook even grossly apparent flaws in a new hire. By being productively paranoid they objectively scrutinize and evaluate the new hire from the moment he or she starts work. Most hiring authorities make excuses for their new hire (and their decision) by saying things like, "Well, she is new. Let's give them a chance to see how they work out. I want to cut them some slack, especially in the beginning. Everybody struggles here in the beginning. Blah, blah, blah!"

This is the same hiring authority who fires the person six months later and says to himself, "I saw this in the beginning of their employment. I should have let them go six months ago. It was so obvious. I was stupid to let it go on for so long. I could see it in the first two weeks."

Productive paranoia leads to critical evaluation of every new employee.

**Psychological contracts**—This refers to the unwritten set of expectations in the employment relationship as distinct from the formal, codified employment contract. In the case of hiring, it is the perceived agreements made with candidates. "We'll get back to you soon," or "I'll call you in a few days." Unfortunately, many hiring authorities who say these things *don't do them*. These are probably the biggest and most unfortunate, even if unintended, *lies* that hiring authorities tell candidates. It is really sad. And there is simply no good reason for it.

Most experienced and effective hiring authorities simply tell candidates, "We are interviewing a number of quality candidates. If we are interested in pursuing you, we will call you in a few days." Many hiring and interviewing authorities, for



some reason, feel like they have to encourage the candidate by telling them they will call them. Their intentions are certainly wonderful. They do intend to call them when they say they will. But they don't. Other things become a priority, and especially if they have no interest in the candidate, there is no good reason for them to call them, so they just don't. Even the nicest and most courteous interviewing and hiring authorities sometimes do this. We've never been able to figure out why.

Telling a candidate that they will only be called back if there is interest is totally understandable and very few candidates will take it personally or accuse the hiring authority of *lying* to them if they aren't called back. They may not like the fact that they aren't being called back but at least they don't feel like they were lied to. Remember the story we tell in our *100,000 Successful Hires* book about the hiring authority who very graphically told us what we should tell a prospective candidate who a few years earlier, as an interviewer, had misled him about calling him back? There is just no good reason to be rude like this and make enemies.

If an experienced, successful hiring authority is certain they will pursue the candidate, they make an emphatic statement like, "Call me in two days and we will make arrangements to get you back in here." They set a specific time and date to connect with the candidate.

The most experienced hiring authorities know there is no way to completely avoid these psychological biases. Just being aware of them makes a difference.

"Change . . . why change?  
Things are bad enough as they are."

—Lord Salisbury