

Don't hire yourself! 1/42/24



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'Don't hire yourself!' is a campaign-like slogan that resonates loudly across the Nordic countries this autumn to warn employers against giving in to the temptation to hire only people like them and to encourage them to cast their net wider for the talent they need. This article highlights the manifestations and consequences of bias in candidate selection, puts forward arguments for recruitment that is open to diversity and inclusive in the light of the latest EU demographic trends, and makes specific recommendations for guidelines and activities in the recruitment process.

What's wrong with people like you – why this warning?

Studies suggest¹ that when it comes to prospective hires (just like spaces we love to be in) we are consciously or unconsciously looking for some common characteristics we share. Yet hoping to find reflections of our own traits among the pool of candidates can prevent us from noticing a variety of talent, experience and qualification, which could prove to be crucial for our organisation's growth and competitiveness. We tend to look for our own reflections throughout the recruitment process, from selecting the target audience and communication channels, creating ads, shortlisting applicants, conducting interviews and evaluating candidates, to hiring and onboarding the best fit. However, while a copy of their own features can serve the interests of business leaders in the short term by creating a personal comfort zone where they can feel secure, embracing diversity and various perspectives that will enrich their team and organisation can become a key competitive advantage in the long term.

Looking for your own reflections isn't usually based on admiring yourself, but rather on having conscious and unconscious biases against people that seem substantially different from us, as well as on insecurity about how that difference will fit in and whether I as a business leader will be able to cope with it. For example, because of fear about how a young manager will be able to manage an employee who is more mature and possibly more competent than the manager, your organisation hires an employee who is not so mature in terms of experience and age and not so competent, but whom the young manager will feel more comfortable managing. Or, being afraid of neurodiversity, your organisation rejects an excellent, motivated IT professional and instead hires an employee with mediocre expertise and weaker motivation yet matching the manager's idea of normality. In both cases the candidate selection is unlikely to provide your organisation with the maximum potential for growth, while the manager stays in his comfort zone.

Before we can even notice, recognise and attract talent that is different from ourselves, we need to understand our own biases and insecurities and the potential and value of diversity, as well as how different people go about looking for a job or changing jobs and how this activity is affected by a structural experience of inequality, power relations and discrimination. In the corporate environment it's usual to think that equality means equal treatment of everyone, yet equal treatment can even aggravate inequality. Thus, if we are to provide everyone with equitable opportunities, we need to understand each person's special needs and adapt our recruitment process accordingly. An adapted approach is a precondition not only for the principle of equity but also for finding the best hire, which would help us build a successful, growing and socially sustainable organisation in today's job market.

If we consciously avoid hiring people that represent particular social groups (e.g. hires aged 50+, a widely discriminated employee group in Latvia²) we not only avoid finding and recruiting the best possible candidates, but we also continue to pave the way for discriminatory attitudes in the job market, hindering social and economic growth.

To make it possible for you to consciously attract talent from the widest possible range of candidates, your recruitment process needs awareness and specific knowledge about recruiting diversity, as well as appropriate guidelines and systems. For example, the way an employer formulates his job ads alone can limit the motivation or opportunity for different people to apply, making the ad fall foul of anti-discrimination laws.

Demographic context in the EU³

Demographic trends across the EU clearly point to necessary changes in the characteristics and availability of the future workforce. Did you know any of the statistics set out below?

- The European population has grown older than ever before, the EU average age has reached 45 years, and 35% of the Latvian population are aged 55+.
- The percentage of people aged 65+ will rise from 14% of the total population in 2000 to 25% by 2040, and the percentage of people aged 65+ will be as high as youths below 25.
- A multigenerational working environment becomes inevitable and even 4-5 generations could be sharing the same workplace.
- The EU population rose by 4% over the period from 2003 to 2023, while the Latvian population fell by 18%, achieving the largest relative drop in the EU, and Latvia is among the least populated member states.
- Fewer marriages are contracted and at a later age, fewer children are born and at a later age, the number of births to women aged 40+ doubled over the period from 2002 to 2022.
- There are 5% more women than men in the EU, yet Latvia has the highest ratio (16% more women), while men in Latvia have the lowest life expectancy in the EU.
- One in five EU residents have neurodiversity.
- One in four EU residents have a disability.
- The EU workforce is expected to shrink from ~246 million in 2020 to ~230 million by 2050, i.e. a total loss of 16 million workers.
- International immigration is on the increase, with 7 million people having immigrated in the EU (5.1 million from non-EU countries) in 2022 and 13.9 million EU citizens living outside their member state of origin.

These are just some of key EU demographic changes that significantly affect the job market, such as increasing (im)migration, ageing populations, falling birth rates, family changes, and recognising the presence of neurodiversity and disability. But how do you as employers respond to these changes? If these demographics reflect our customers and the society we are living in, then how you as employers and business leaders can understand and supply their needs with your goods, services or solutions? Is a one-size-fits-all approach that reflects your own imaginary normality going to be sufficient and competitive?

The recruitment process is worth taking a wider view through the prism of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) because diversity is more comprehensive than we consciously realise. Simply stated, the goals of DEI are to prevent discrimination in the job market, to embrace differences such as origin, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age and physical abilities, and to recognise and utilise the

unique contribution each individual is able to make. Demographics keep changing, and one reason organisations need to consider them is to avoid producing goods, services, solutions and technologies exclusively for the market segment that reflects their own imaginary normality stemming from their lack of diversity awareness.

Recruitment guidelines – how to avoid hiring yourself⁴

Recruitment is a process that involves attracting, evaluating, selecting and hiring people with knowledge, skills and abilities that are essential for achieving your organisational goals. An inclusive organisation that is aware of the pitfalls of hiring yourself should, firstly, recognise the value of diversity and the obstacles to diversity inclusion. Secondly, it should be using various recruitment channels and notification measures to widen the range of prospective hires and secure a positive recruitment experience. Thirdly, to achieve its DEI goals, it should be offering various employment opportunities, such as full time or part time, flexible or hybrid working arrangements, temporary or permanent work, internship or contract work. Fourthly, to attract a workforce with a variety of experiences, while also considering the diverse abilities and socio-economic backgrounds of candidates, organisations should be extending opportunities to demographically under-represented groups and to persons that wish to return to work after a period away or need flexible additional solutions. When it comes to deciding what evaluation and selection systems to use, organisations should be aware of possible bias, including in the algorithms of automated human resource systems and machine-learning programmes.

Action examples

To make these guidelines more tangible, I will offer examples of specific activities.⁵ Once your organisation is clear about its diversity management policy or strategy, has identified its diversity maturity and developed its diversity competence, achieving your DEI goals in the recruitment process should entail the following activities:

- Transparent, equitable and non-discriminatory practices and tools should be developed and used, considering the risk of conscious and unconscious bias in humans and automated systems.
- Notification measures as well as various and accessible recruitment channels should be used to arouse interest from the widest range of candidates.
- Any communication that advertises a job should use images created in a positive mood showing people from various social groups, plus inclusive formulations.
- Your DEI principles and goals should be stated in your agreements with recruitment agencies and other suppliers.
- Your recruitment strategies and measures should offer inclusion opportunities to foster the career growth of people from demographically under-represented groups, taking into account considerations of flexibility and accessibility, as well as the distribution of skills and roles.
- Vacancies should be created with due regard for flexibility, accessibility or adaptations that would satisfy specific individual needs as far as possible.
- Your job descriptions should outline the job to be done and the required knowledge, skills and inclusive behaviours, as well as skills that will need developing or updating.
- Candidates should be given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, abilities and potential in performing their job duties, with lawful, reliable and equitable methods of

selection and evaluation that include adaptations for satisfying specific individual needs.

- Data should be aggregated on each stage of your recruitment process, including notification and outsourcing activities to determine what sources and channels yield the widest range of workforce to fill your vacancies.
- Data should be aggregated on the number and diversity of people moving through each stage of the recruitment process.
- Data should be aggregated to identify opportunities and risks at each stage of the recruitment process to identify any bias or discrimination.
- You should revise your recruitment strategy and outcomes, as well as their impact on your efforts to become a more inclusive employer.

How can we know if we are doing well?

Examples of metrics that should be measured and analysed to assess the quality of your recruitment practices in terms of DEI could be as follows:

- The number of candidates interested in working for your organisation as a result of wider notification measures
- The number and description of candidates moving through each stage of your recruitment process
- The number and type of adaptations requested and made
- The number of complaints and incidents associated with bias or discrimination
- The number of offers made in comparison to the number of offers accepted and the reasons for rejection
- The efficiency of your recruitment strategies, channels, methods and activities in different periods, including staff turnover and retention data

These activities and metrics will help organisations avoid the pitfalls of looking for your own reflection in prospective hires, i.e. hire people from the widest social groups, including the demographically under-represented ones. Following these recommendations will also help you identify and mitigate the risks of bias and discrimination at every recruitment stage, including the use of automated human resource systems, and people are likely to recognise your organisation as an equitable and inclusive workplace where everyone can feel valuable. Remember, however, that a key precondition for the efficiency of these measures is the diversity competence of business leaders.

¹ For example, <https://magmaforskning.econa.no/index.php/magma/article/view/435/435>

² Agnese Cimdirina's articles in Latvian:

Age diversity on the job market – an asset we are not using

Survey: More than half of Latvian employees have faced age discrimination at their workplace

How much does age discrimination cost?

Is a worker aged over 50 a liability or an asset?

³ Data sources for demographic trends:

Demography of Europe – 2024 edition

Disability in the EU: facts and figures

Neurodiversity Power project

Thon, Andreas & Göran Roos Kristiania Rapport 2024/1

“Politikk, strategier og praksis for ledelse av en aldrende arbeidsstyrke, i et multigenerasjons arbeidsliv i Norge En systematisk gjennomgang av internasjonal forskningslitteratur”. Institutt for ledelse og organisasjon (ILO)

⁴ Derived from ISO 30415:2021 “Human resource management – Diversity and inclusion” guidelines

⁵ Recommendations based on ISO 30415:2021 “Human resource management – Diversity and inclusion” guidelines