

HIRING and RECRUITMENT

Inclusive Recruitment and Hiring Practices

Actionable steps to improving diversity and inclusion in the hiring process.

By Angie Sommer, S.E. and the NCSEA SE3 Committee

As conversations about diversity and inclusion occur in board rooms and break rooms of structural engineering firms nationwide, many professionals ask, what can we do to obtain and retain a more diverse workforce?

The NCSEA Structural Engineering Engagement and Equity (SE3) Committee has been working to understand and improve the day-to-day experiences and career trajectories for structural engineers via comprehensive nationwide surveys, data analysis, and a variety of other initiatives since 2015. Addressing recruitment and hiring practices has been one recent focus of the committee, which was explored in a 2022 SE3 publication entitled “Inclusive Recruitment & Hiring Practices” that can be found on the SE3 Committee website: <https://www.se3committee.com/publications>. This article explores some of the ideas in this SE3 publication, including actionable steps to improving inclusion in recruitment and hiring.

The 2020 SE3 survey included responses from over 5,000 structural engineering professionals from all 50 states. Of this group:

- 24% of total respondents (but only 10% of principals) were women
- 23% of total respondents (but only 14% of principals) were non-white or mixed race
- 65% of women report having considered leaving the profession, compared to only 51% of men
- Women and minority racial groups were 1.5 to 19 times more likely than white men to experience discrimination and/or harassment (Figure 1), and respondents who had experienced discrimination or harassment were 20% more likely to have considered leaving the profession.

Topic briefs that include this data can be found at the SE3 committee website noted previously. While this data isn't necessarily comprehensive, these findings point to an overall lack of diversity (and likely a lack of inclusion) in the structural engineering profession, especially at higher levels of leadership. This, coupled with both the “business case” (the argument that diversity benefits a company's bottom line) and the “fairness case” (the argument that justifies diversity on moral grounds), have prompted many firms to explore how they can improve recruitment and hiring practices to be more inclusive.

The Business Case for Diversity

In recent years, there have been many studies and subsequent articles that cite statistics about how companies with staff — and especially leadership — from diverse backgrounds benefit financially over those with less diversity. This is often cited to be due to the increased innovation and creativity infused by people who think in different ways from an otherwise homogenous group. Clients may also relate better to staff at a company who are like them, so having staff from different backgrounds could appeal to a larger pool of clients. In fact, some public jurisdictions are starting to have requirements (or at least bonus points) for diversity on teams that submit for RFPs.

One robust study of the business case for diversity is a McKinsey & Company report entitled “Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters.” This report is broad, studying the financial performance of over 1,000 large companies in 15 countries. While not specific

ODDS OF DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT BY RACE AND GENDER DEMOGRAPHICS

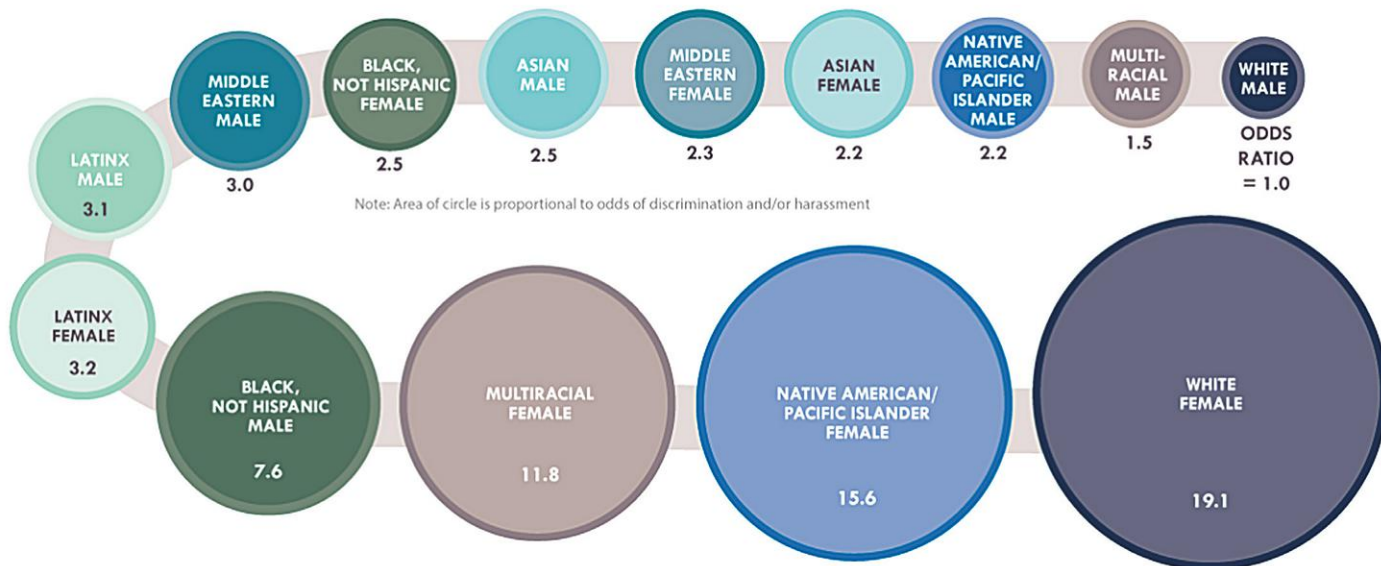


Figure 1 Odds of Discrimination and Harassment by Race and Gender Demographics from the 2020 NCSEA SE3 survey data.

to structural engineering, the data is compelling. The 2019 analysis found that:

- 1) Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 25 percent more likely to have above-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile, and
- 2) Companies in the top quartile for ethnic and cultural diversity on executive teams outperformed those in the fourth quartile by 36 percent in profitability.

While the “business case for diversity” remains an important rhetoric to initiate diversity discussions in corporate settings, recent research indicates that specifically citing this reasoning within job ads or on a company’s website can alienate potential candidates from diverse backgrounds, as noted in the Harvard Business Review (HBR) article entitled “Stop Making the Business Case for Diversity.” This article suggests instead to either cite the fairness case for diversity on outward-facing materials, or, better yet, state diversity as a value without justifying why you believe it to be important, in the same way you would not justify other values such as innovation, resilience, and integrity.

Assessing Goals

Improving inclusion in recruitment and hiring practices begins with assessing goals. What is the purpose of this effort for your company? What do you value about diversity — the business case, the fairness case, or something else? What types of people and perspectives do you have in abundance, and which are you lacking? Consider that diversity is not only about race or ethnicity; there are many identities that can provide different points of view, such as sexual identity, religious affiliation, country of origin, educational background, age, and ability/disability status.

Rethink Your Job Postings

After creating goals, review how your job postings are written. Certain wording can evoke gendered or other slanted imagery that can prevent certain candidates from feeling a connection with the position. For example, a few potential phrases that slant masculine are noted below, with suggestions for more neutral wording.

More Masculine	More Neutral
Strong communication skills	Proficient oral and written skills
Ability to perform in a competitive environment	Collaborates well in a team environment
Superior ability to satisfy clients	Sensitive to client needs, can develop positive relationships

Additionally, easing some of the minimum requirements to apply for the job (e.g., a master’s degree is preferred but not required) or allowing remote work can appeal to different types of qualified people. Consider specifically, as originally found in a Hewlett Packard report and noted in the book *Lean In* among a variety of other articles, that women are significantly less likely than men to apply for a job for which they do not meet all the stated requirements. In the HBR article entitled “Why Women Don’t Apply for Jobs Unless They’re 100% Qualified,” they note that this isn’t due to a lack of confidence exactly, but rather that women and girls are rigorously socialized to follow rules, while boys and men are often taught to view rules more as guidelines in which

other factors also play a role. These differing approaches can have a significant effect on one’s entry into the job market.

Thus, while it is important to find qualified candidates and pose your job ads to do so, it is also important to think about how certain concepts are phrased and which skills are required versus merely preferred. This way, good candidates don’t opt out of the process before you have a chance to consider them.

Review Your Recruitment Practices

It is important to understand that where and how you recruit has as much of an impact as who you recruit. If you send the same staff to the same colleges year after year, it seems reasonable that you recruit similar people. Evaluate where your company attends recruiting fairs and find opportunities to branch out to different locations. Virtual recruiting fairs can help you reach a wider variety of locations without investing significant additional resources.

Sending staff from diverse backgrounds (of different ethnicities, genders, ages, positions, etc.) to recruitment fairs is another way to attract candidates from diverse backgrounds. People are naturally attracted to those who are similar to them; having a diverse group of people meaningfully involved in your recruitment and interviewing efforts can help yield more diverse hires.

By including a diverse group in your hiring process, you also showcase who is successful and valued at your firm, no matter their age or position. Note that buy-in is key; the staff involved in this process must be valued decision-makers, otherwise you risk tokenizing those who are involved, which can undermine your efforts. Additionally, be aware of overextending certain people who may be one of only a few members of a particular group at your company; their participation in the recruitment and hiring process must be valued and rewarded as much as other tasks that promote the company’s well-being.

Minimize Unconscious Bias

Interactions with candidates affect which candidates are offered, and accept, positions at your company. Understanding and minimizing bias can help reduce unintended actions and consequences of natural biases. Three types of bias that can affect the recruitment and hiring processes are confirmation bias, affinity bias, and gender and race biases.

Confirmation bias	Affinity bias	Gender and race biases
The tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one’s existing beliefs or theories.	A preference for people who are similar to or have the same qualities as ourselves.	When a person faces unfair disadvantages (or benefits from unearned advantages) because of their gender or race.

Basic bias awareness can be achieved with minimal effort through simple online research. Searching the phrase “bias awareness” on the internet, for example, will yield a host of articles describing what bias is and how everyone has biases based on the way the human brain works and how we are socialized. Acknowledging that we all have biases that may cause us to act in certain ways, even when our intentions are good, is the first step to consciously minimizing the effects of our biases.

Doing the work of addressing bias in a professional setting requires discussion, reflection, and revision. As Professor Iris Bohnet from

Harvard Kennedy School puts it, “While it’s exceedingly difficult to remove bias from an individual, it’s possible to design organizations in ways that make it harder for biased minds to skew judgment.” Professional coaches and classes are available to train staff about how to limit the effect of bias in the workplace.

Establish a Formalized Interview Process

Establishing a consistent interview process is a way to get as close to fairness as possible. An example of a robust and consistent interview process might include:

- 1) A pre-interview internal kick-off meeting in which roles, timelines, and process are discussed;
- 2) Candidate interviews, which may involve a shorter, more casual interview, followed by a technical quiz or test, then a more formal interview with a different person or people; and
- 3) A post-interview recap with the internal recruitment team to discuss a candidate’s ability to perform the required job functions.

In addition to establishing a consistent and clear internal process, interviews with candidates should be structured to create consistency. Research shows that unstructured interviews that lack defined questions and instead allow a candidate’s skills to unfold organically through conversation do not reliably predict job success. Use the same set of questions in the same order for each candidate, allowing each question to be well-thought-out and vetted instead of presenting topics on the fly.

Conclusions and Actions

There are many steps a company can take to improve inclusion in recruitment and hiring practices. This process requires time, reflection, revision, and dedication. Do not be discouraged if the first effort does not yield the intended results; take the opportunity to learn something from the experience and adjust to do better next time. Organizational changes do not happen overnight. Be patient, be persistent, and track your progress over time to ensure you are making progress toward your goals. ■

Full references are included in the online version of the article at STRUCTUREmag.org.

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CONCRETE guide

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