

Overcoming Interview Bias

by Simma Lieberman and Kate Berardo

Be prepared to encounter and overcome interview bias in the workplace.

This article is also available at [JobGuru.com \(www.jobguru.com\)](http://www.jobguru.com), where Simma and Kate serve as career experts in diversity issues.

Your job interview is tomorrow. You know your appearance will matter, so you polish your shoes and brush your hair. You realize your interviewer will have your resume in hand, so you've come prepared to explain every minute detail included on it. You've even done practice interviews and prepared your responses to all the trick questions.

Are you ready?
Not yet.

There remains a single type of preparation that you should do that can make or break your interview—knowing how to handle the possible biases of an interviewer. You need this knowledge because of a simple reality; interviews are subjective, no matter how many objective indicators are introduced. Interviewers are human, and all carry with them some assumptions about different types of people. Despite what may be valid attempts to leave these assumptions behind in the process, even the most earnest interviewer may be letting some of these biases make their way into the decision-making process. The best candidate for a job has many a time been passed over in the interview process because of bias. You don't want to be one of them.

You're not likely to be able to change the bias itself in the short duration of the interview, and you may not be able to recognize it with so much else going on. You can, however, insure that the interviewer will not apply their assumptions toward you. This means preparing for the possible

biases of an interviewer before you encounter him/her. You therefore need to recognize the most likely biases people may have toward you and prepare to address these biases in interviews to minimize their impact.

Pinpointing Potential Biases

Many people think biases surround visible differences that people have, like race, gender, or appearance. This is true. However, biases usually run much deeper and assumptions are made about a number of other potential differences you may have with your interviewer. An interviewer may unconsciously make assumptions about you based on the way that you speak, your age, or any of the background information you have listed on your resume.

To figure out some of the biases that may surface, give some thought to comments people have made to you in the past that surprised you. Have people thought you were much younger or older than you actually are? Have they assumed you were less intelligent because of your accent? Have you been labeled because of the way you dress? Have people been surprised to learn something in particular about you? Make a list of some of these assumptions or obstacles that could prevent the interviewer from seeing you as the best candidate. You need to be proactive and help the interviewer see your differences as being valuable rather than obstacles.

Use your friends to add to your recollection. Ask them what their first impressions of you were. Colleagues and mentors from the past are especially valuable since they know you in a work atmosphere and work attire. Have a diverse group of people read through your resume and create a list of five statements they would make about you based on your resume. Ask them to limit their responses to information on the resume and explain your goal in the exercise so you get honest answers. Combine these statements with ones people have made about you in the past and keep a list handy with all of these assumptions.

The Information Inundation Technique

Once you get a sense for the impression you make and possibility of biases, you can address them in such a way to make your differences strengths. You should still be focused on demonstrating why you are a qualified candidate for the job. Therefore, while delivering persuasive responses to interviewer questions, incorporate information in your responses that will also break through biases. Here are some suggestions:

① **Match their speech and behaviors.** It is a good idea in general to match your interviewers in terms of their speech and behaviors in order to create rapport. If an interviewer is formal in their speech, you should be as well. If they sit up straight, don't slouch. If they speak slowly, watch your own speed so you don't overwhelm them. Different cultures and backgrounds have different pacing in terms of communication. If they wait for each person to take turns speaking, don't overlap while they are talking no matter how enthusiastic you feel. This will help reduce assumptions they make about you based on perceived differences.

② **Acknowledge & Spin It.** If you sense a possible bias, don't be afraid to address your differences. If you have an accent, explain what you do to make yourself understood better. If you are young, note it, but also explain what your age adds and focus more on the experiences you have had that makes you worthy of the position. Let him/her know that you have worked with people of all ages. Include the fact that you bring new ideas but also respect the experiences and knowledge of people who have been there longer. If you are over 45, explain that you have already learned from earlier mistakes and will save the company money because of this. Show him/her a new skill you have learned to counter assumptions that older people are not current on new technologies. If you are a woman working in a male-dominated profession, explain what you can add to the position very specifically because you are female. Speak to the fact that you are good at bringing men and women together. For all difference, make a point to show the value of the aspect in question.

③ **Find a connection.** When you get the chance to ask your own questions at the end of the interview, work to establish a connection with your interviewer. Ask them what they like about the company in question, and communicate your ability to relate to some of the traits he or she identifies. Make a point of smiling and try to be friendly. An open, communicative style on your part is helpful to address any negative biases that person may unconsciously be holding against you.

④ **Communicate your Bridge Building potential.** A successful job candidate is not only someone who can do the job, but someone who can work in the organization's culture and be able to do the job well in the long run. Interviewers with biases may assume that you will not fit well into the organization's culture because of your differences. Communicate your ability to work with different people, think from different perspectives, and be open-minded. Give examples. Ask about the company culture and talk about your ability to work with and relate to different people. Make it explicit how your differences can contribute to the culture of the organization.

⑤ **Make it a strength.** Have you had to deal with this someone who has been biased before because of something about the way you are? Use the experience to show your interviewer how you successfully overcame a difficulty. Emphasize the learning and growth you experienced as a result. This can help an interviewer recognize that their own unconscious bias is impacting their impressions. Make sure you don't insinuate in any way that your interviewer is biased. Your job in the interview is to demonstrate that you are a highly-skilled individual equipped to do the job for which you are applying. Critiquing your interviewer is not a step in the right direction.

⑥ **Stay positive.** Have you noticed that it is that much harder to sit up straight when you are feeling down in the dumps? Most people show their emotions in one way or another, and facing possible biases is likely to stir some serious emotions of anger, frustration, devastation, or defeat. It is important to push through these feelings during the interview so that it doesn't impact your de-

meanor during the rest of the interview. Most people are not even aware of their biases or the assumptions they make. You can decide later whether you want to work for the company the interviewer represents.

⑦ **Make a Habit of it.** Finally, get into the habit of building bias prep into your interview prep. Build these techniques into your responses and practice saying them so you are comfortable in the interview. Have a friend role-play the interview as you address your dimensions of diversity. Make it realistic. How will you face this practice situation?

Everyone has biases and assumptions that are learned from early childhood. We develop them as a result of our age, experiences, culture, ethnicity, economic background and other factors. You can't tell just by looking at someone what their biases and assumptions might be. At the same time you have to be prepared for the possibility of bias in order to take the opportunity to show yourself as the best candidate to do the job.

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