



Scaling fast: how to get hiring right.

A GUIDE FOR START-UPS AND SCALE-UPS

People will make or break your business...

So get smart with your recruitment.

Finding and hiring great people to join your team is hard. Particularly when time is of the essence, you're growing fast, bursting at the seams and need people yesterday.

Sadly, traditional recruitment processes aren't particularly helpful. They rely on antiquated methods, typically prioritise speed over quality of decision and then leave you with no data to work out if you've actually hired successfully.

Hiring no longer has to be a compromise of speed over quality. In fact, by being smart about using data and technology, you can achieve all three and have the data to prove it.

This is our guide for those feeling those growing pains. Because we think your recruitment should be as innovative as your business is.

Great talent, diversity of background and speed should not be a trade-off.

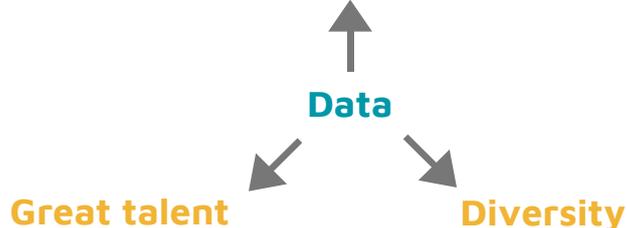
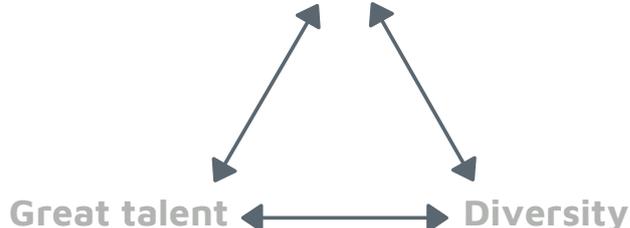
Old

vs

New

Speed

Speed



You wouldn't let your marketing department operate without an ROI...

So why should it be any different with your recruitment? For roles where an outstanding employee can be 25 times as productive as an average employee, why leave this down to the chance of a 6-10 second CV sift? It's time to turn your recruitment process into a science.



7.4 seconds

The average time taken to review a CV ¹



25x

Higher productivity of a top 1% employee ²

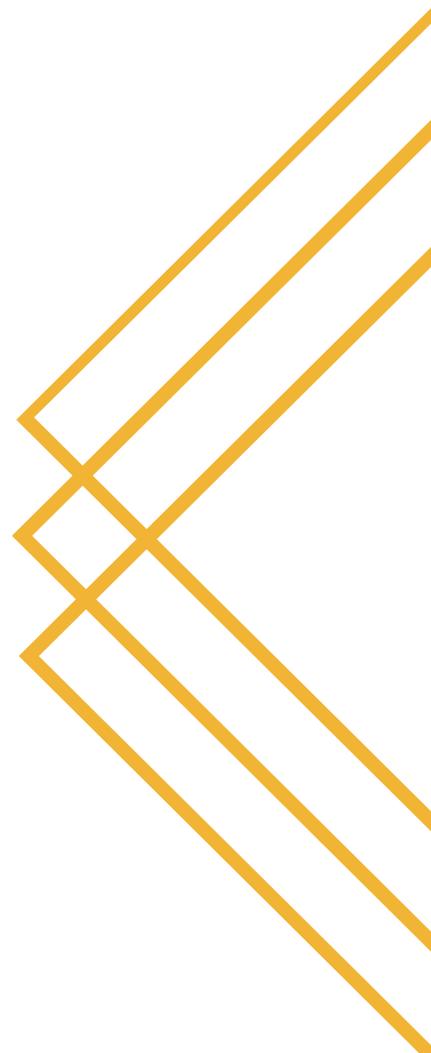
The CV is dead

Let's be clear. Research and data have given us some pretty strong views about the way people currently recruit - and we're more than happy to share them.

Each chapter of this guide will go into one step of our recommended recruitment process, talking about the best data-proven way to go about it, and then how to do it yourself, in a very practical sense.

Ultimately, we want your hiring process to be:

- 1) Focused on getting the best talent for the role**
- 2) An enabler of diversity of thought and background**
- 3) Efficient and productive**
- 4) Data-driven, so that you can validate your efforts**



Smarter hiring processes

We think traditional recruitment processes are fundamentally broken. Driven by gut, proxies and feel, they are simply not effective. In fact they perpetuate inequalities. We've used the following key to indicate the relative levels of bias and predictivity in a traditional process:

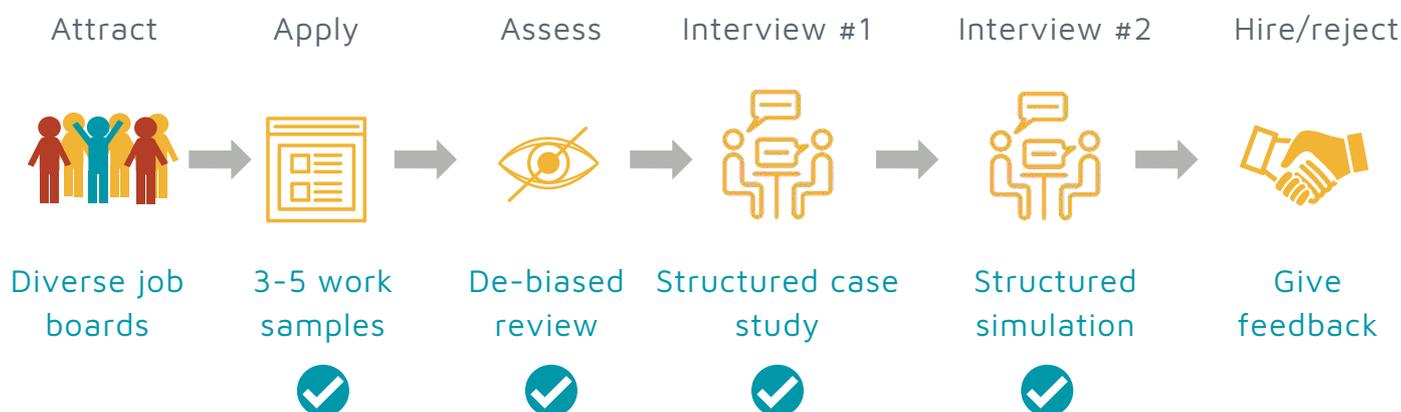
 Bias introduced  Not very predictive  Highly predictive

Traditional Recruitment Process



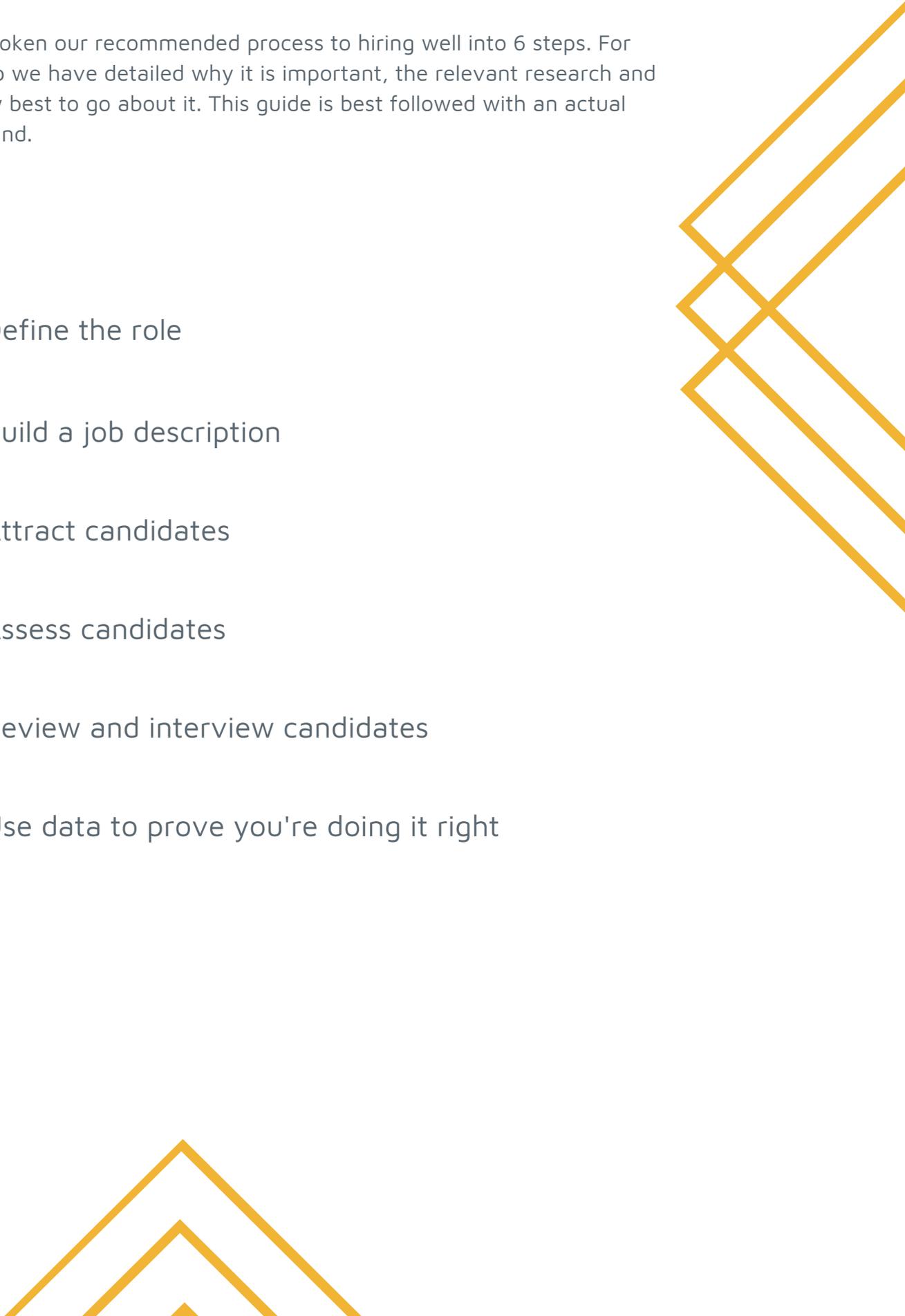
Here's what we recommend instead. A much less noisy and far more predictive process:

Recommended Recruitment Process



The guide

We've broken our recommended process to hiring well into 6 steps. For each step we have detailed why it is important, the relevant research and then how best to go about it. This guide is best followed with an actual role in mind.

- 1 Define the role
 - 2 Build a job description
 - 3 Attract candidates
 - 4 Assess candidates
 - 5 Review and interview candidates
 - 6 Use data to prove you're doing it right
- 

1. How to define the role



Know what you are looking for

Get this right and it will save you time

All too often, people will jump straight to the job description to start sculpting the role they are looking for. However, probably the most important part of your recruitment process is thinking deeply about the skills, capabilities and values that you want the person to bring in this role.

What you want to do is define a list of 6-8 skill words or phrases that you are looking for and then test for these skills. Simple right?

But why?

We do this for 2 reasons:

- 1) When it is clear what you are looking for, it becomes clear how and what to assess candidates on.
- 2) Defining criteria explicitly up-front makes it harder for bias to creep in. This is because there will be less chance for gut or subjectivity to come into the process, if you've define success clearly at the start.

The dangers of culture fit

Culture fit is a tricky one. Yes we want someone who shares the values of the team and organisation. Yes we want someone who can work well in your team. But 'culture' is often used as a catch-all which can include bias (i.e. they weren't like me). Make sure you define explicitly what your culture and values are and test on that.

Defining the 6-8 skills

We use the term skills as a catch-all for a skill, capability, trait, characteristic, value or any other thing that is important to your role.

The 6-8 skills are best comprised of a combination of technical skills (e.g. content marketing), values-based descriptors (e.g. integrity, passion) and working characteristics (e.g. creativity, leadership).

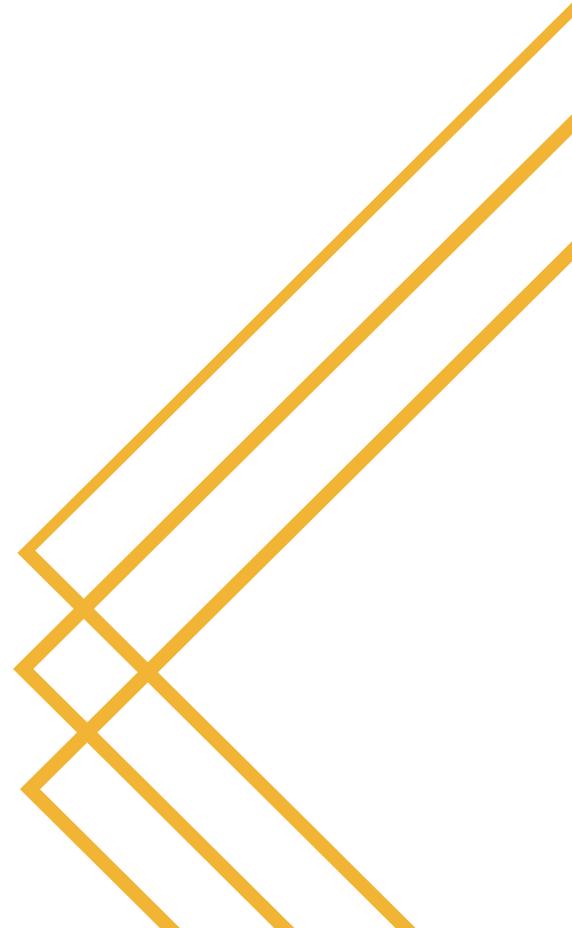
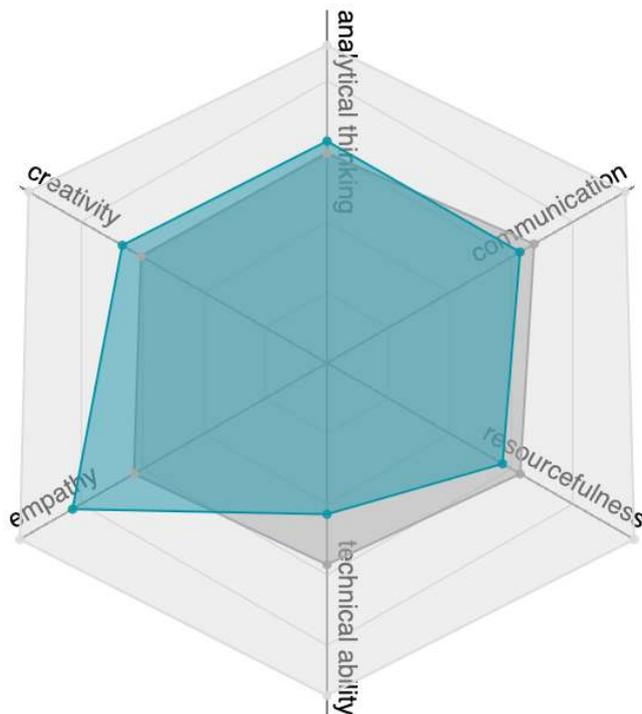
Two of each is ideal, however it is not uncommon for there to be more technical skills required.

An example skills map is shown below from a Data Scientist role. This plots a candidate's scores against each skill and compares it to their cohort's average and highest scorer.

The skills chosen were:

- Empathy
- Communication
- Resourcefulness
- Creativity
- Technical ability
- Analytical thinking

As you can see there is a good mixture of value-based and technical skills.



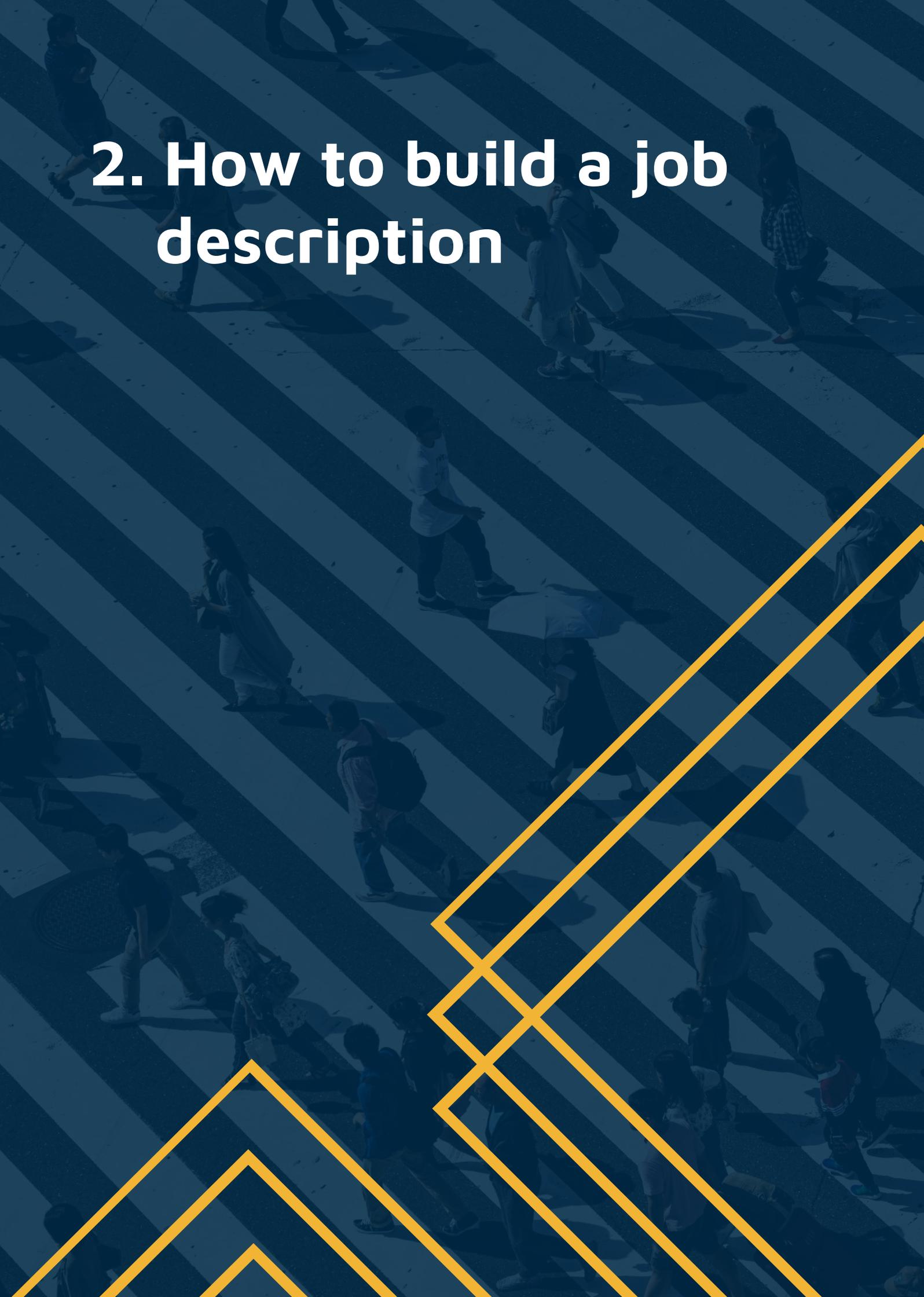
Checklist: defining the role

Below is a checklist of the items that are important at this stage. Don't be tempted to skip this step. Everything else will flow easily from this point if the thought is invested.

- Define or collect your organisation's values or cultural pillars
- Brainstorm the objectives and tasks that the role will need to perform
- Determine which skills and capabilities are required to do those tasks
- Determine which skills are required now versus can be taught or coached over time.
- Distill a list of 6-8 skill phrases from the above lists (3 values + 5 skills is a good mix)

You now know very clearly what you are looking for. From this foundation you can now build your job description and assess candidates to get to the root of the skills you care about.

2. How to build a job description



Are you hiring for one of these roles?

Competition for talent is fierce and this is particularly the case for fast-growing start-ups and scale-ups.

Our own study of over 200 start-ups in the UK has shown that they are all recruiting for the same types of roles:

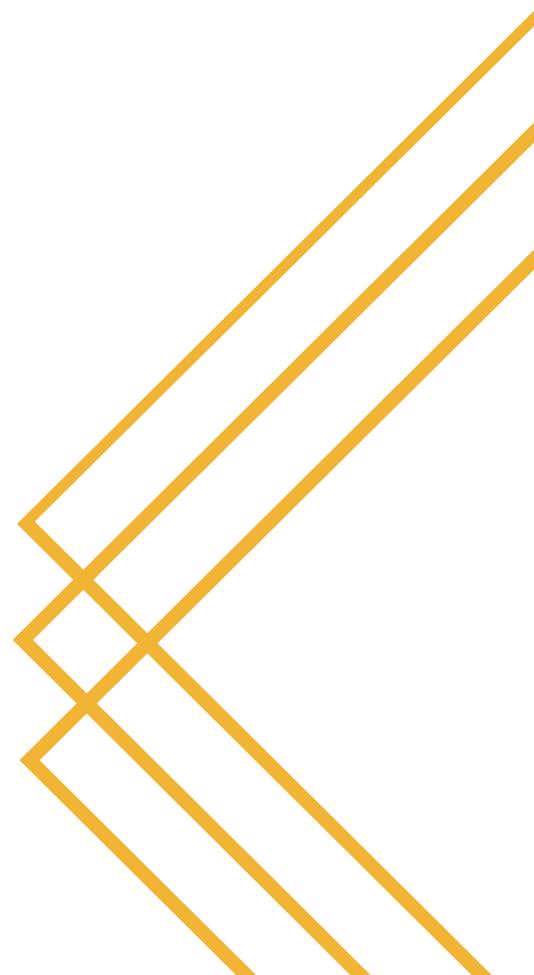
- Marketing director
- Growth marketer
- Head of growth
- Sales director
- Head of people
- Full stack engineer
- UX designer

Employer brands are no longer just for large companies.

So having a strong employer brand and speaking clearly about why your company's mission and team are awesome is a must.

That's why we recommend that you put real excitement into your job description to grab the attention of top talent who might be busy.

Accompany the launch of your roles with a blog written by your team. Pull all the levers at your disposal to draw people in.



Words matter

Poor job descriptions will limit applications

Particularly if you want to attract a diverse set of top talent. So it's important to get it right and make sure you don't just go and grab the first JD that Google serves up.

A JD has to say a lot, but in a concise and interesting way. Therefore, we recommend the following structure:

- Hook - A gripping short summary of the role and org
- About us - A compelling and exciting description of your org
- About the role - What the role entails. Realistic but enticing.
- About you - A transparent list of the skills you are looking for
- Why us - Why your people and team are amazing
- Hook - Why they should do their best work with you

Before writing, keep in mind the common pitfalls of a poor JD (read our blog [9 reasons your job ads aren't working](#)) such as an endless list of requirements, too long, too complicated and gendered words, among others.

Gendered wording³

Research has shown that there are certain words that we unconsciously associate with masculine or feminine gender roles. The masculine coded words tend to be more agentic (individual, drive, lead), whereas the feminine coded words are more communal (support, cooperate). Unfortunately, job ads which are skewed with gender coded words can make candidates assume that they fit one gender role over another, leading to fewer candidates applying in the first place. It's important to understand where your job ad sits, so that it is as inclusive as possible.

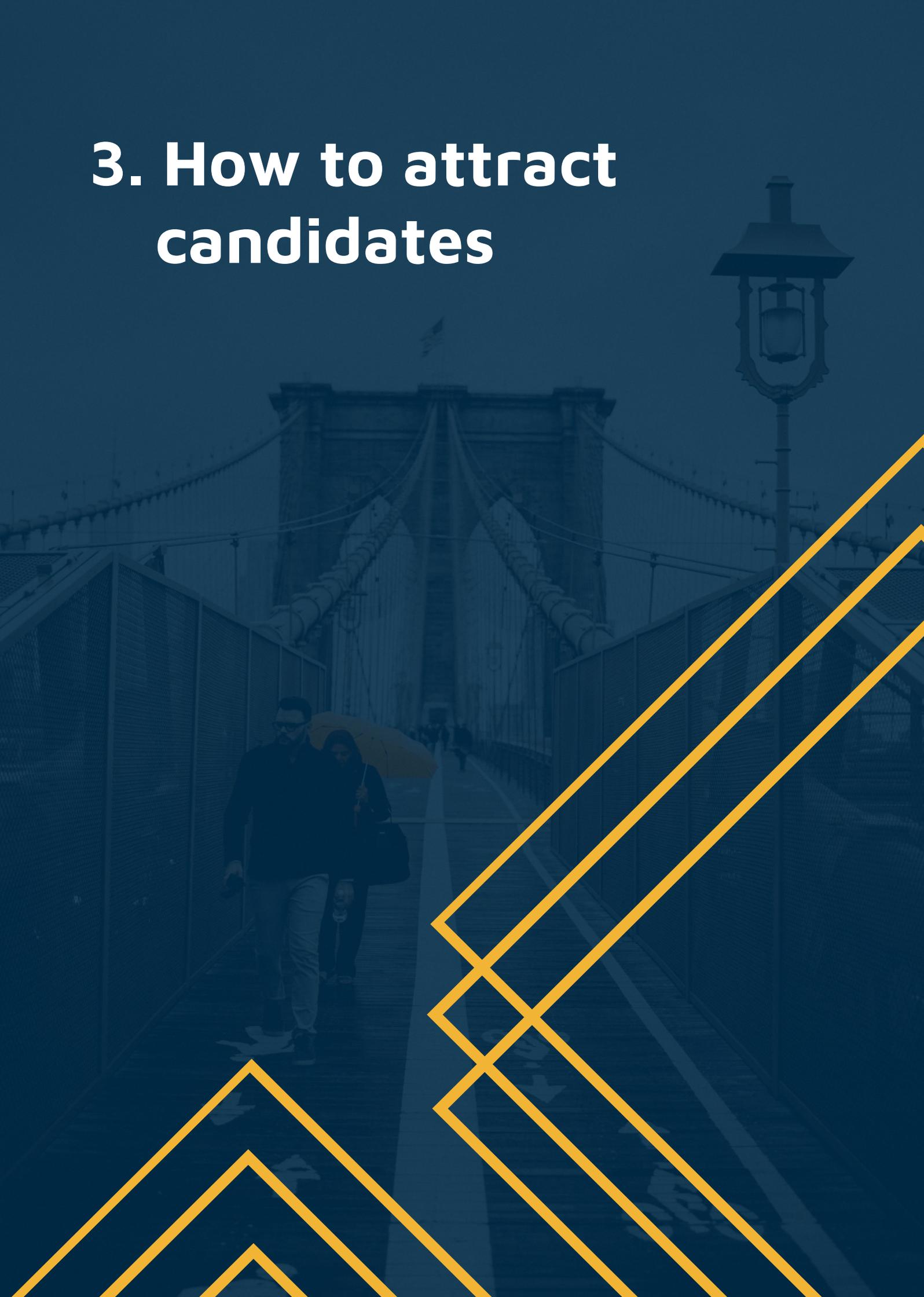
Checklist: building the job description

Below is a checklist of the items that are important at this stage. This is an important step as it not only sets the criteria and expectations for the role, but also sells your organisation and team to potential candidates in a crowded marketplace.

- Define the structure of your job description.
- Write an exciting and enticing blurb on your organisation and team. ('About Us')
- Use your skill list to build the requirements and nice to haves for the role ('About You').
- Make sure you mention your great people perks (e.g. flexible working) ('Why Us')
- Run the job description through a gendered language detection tool. Correct any skews.

You now have an amazing job description that is inclusive and is going to entice great candidates to apply. The next step is getting it out there.

3. How to attract candidates



Build it and they will come...

Unfortunately, it doesn't work like this

Now that you've done the hard yards of building a really well defined and written role, it's critically important to get it out in front of people.

It's important to use all of the levers and resources to get this out to candidates:

- Put a link to the role on your website
- Get your whole team to share it on social media
- Post it to multiple job boards (>5 is best)
- Engage with communities to get the word out (e.g. developers)
- Re-engage with past candidates
- Ask your investors to put it out to their networks

Set the role live for a minimum of 2 weeks and then monitor applicants. Remember that volume of applicants can be a bit of a vanity metric - you only need one, the right one, to hire the best. However, if you feel that people are not seeing the job, then start to post it more widely.

Be aware of hiring through networks

It is okay to encourage people within your networks to apply, as long as a) this is not your only source of candidates and b) that they go through an anonymised and fair review process. Otherwise, the nature of our networks and how we view them leads to hiring in our own image. Sadly this is not a predictive way to hire, no matter how good looking you are.

Which job boards?

There is surprisingly little data on how effective different job boards are at attracting great candidates from diverse backgrounds.

They're also quite expensive given that many are a glorified bulletin board (think between £100 - £500 per role). However, for now they are a necessary aspect of attraction.

We have used our own platform data to understand which job boards give you great candidates from diverse backgrounds. By correlating assessment scores and diversity stats to different sources, we discovered the following:

1) The more specialised and niche the job board is to a function/role (marketing, tech, product), the higher scoring the candidates were.

2) The more focussed on minority groups the job boards were (Work180, GirlsWhoCode) the more diverse the candidates attracted were.

We recommend you choose 4-5 job boards. The more targeted the better.

The leaderboard - last 12 months			
Job site	Gender	Ethnicity	Avg score out of 5
www.reform.uk more details visit			3.8
jobsearch.createyourowncareer.com more details visit			3.2
careerhub.sussex.ac.uk more details visit			3.2
pathfinder.surrey.ac.uk more details visit			3.2
www.responsible-investor.com more details visit			3.2
www.w4mpjobs.org more details visit			3.2

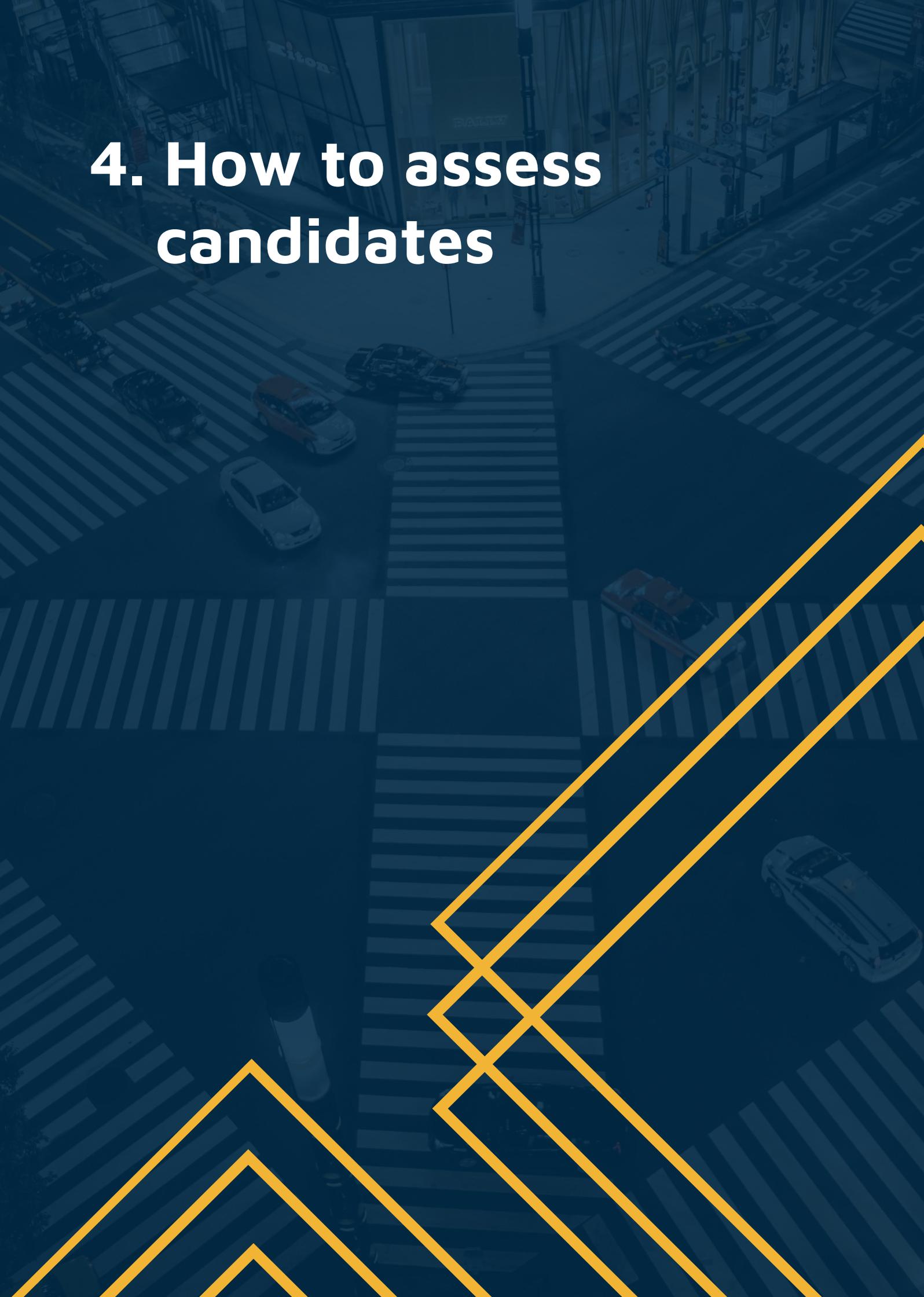
Checklist: attracting candidates

Below is a checklist of the items that are important at this stage. It can sometimes be hard to differentiate your organisation from others and get your name out there. You know what you do is pretty special, now it's a matter of getting it in front of the right candidates.

- Post the job ad onto multiple job boards (free, niche and specialised are the best types).
- Write an accompanying blog expressing exactly why your company is so exciting.
- Get the blog and JD out on to social media.
- Get everyone in your team to share with their contacts.
- Set a clear deadline and send reminder emails.

Keep monitoring your application numbers throughout the period that the job is open. If the numbers are low then do another social media or job board push.

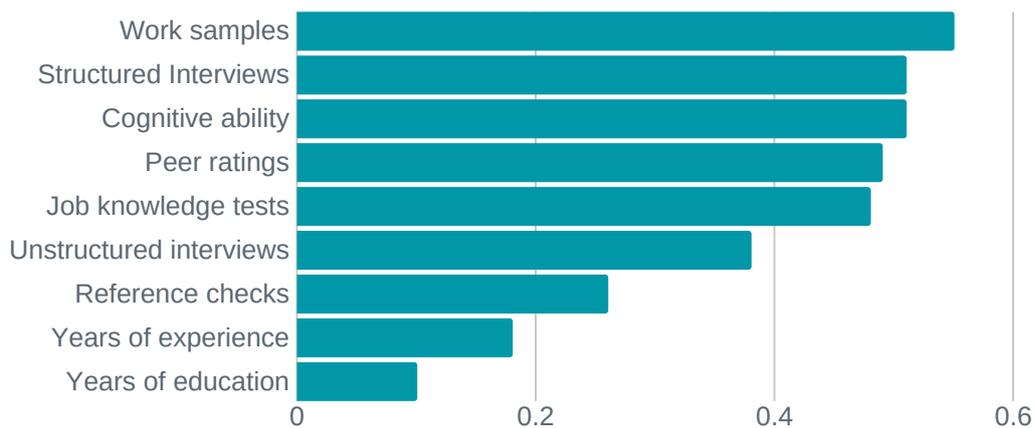
4. How to assess candidates

An aerial, high-angle view of a city street intersection, likely in Japan, showing a grid of white zebra crossings and several cars. The image is overlaid with a dark blue semi-transparent filter. In the bottom right corner, there are several thick, yellow, overlapping geometric lines that form a series of nested, slightly offset rectangular shapes, creating a modern, abstract graphic element.

Use the most predictive methods

in combination with each other to get a full picture

The CV is seriously outdated and the information it provides not only leads to unconscious bias but is also not very predictive of job performance. Schmidt & Hunter's landmark meta-study⁴ on the most predictive forms of assessment showed the below:



Yet people still persist with the CV. What we recommend is that you test up-front with the most predictive form of assessment, so that you aren't artificially cutting out great candidates right at the start. Makes perfect sense right?

We therefore recommend that you take the CV and cover letter and throw them out the window. Instead, replace this sift with 3-5 work samples which test the candidates in 'real' work situation problems focussed on assessing the skills you care about in step 1.

What is a work sample question?

When done right, the work sample or job preview question is the most predictive form of assessment you can use.

In short, it poses a realistic problem or scenario that the candidate could encounter in the job they are applying for and asks them to think through it.

It aims to test for one or two of the skills that you are looking for. Here is the process for building them yourself:

1. Start with the list of skills that you built in section 1.
2. With a skill in mind, think of a scenario on the job that would require that skill.
3. Write the scenario down and make it more generic and form it into a question.
4. Think of what an outstanding answer would be, versus a mediocre response.
5. Write down the question in the form shown in the example.

Role:

- Growth Marketer

Skills tested:

- inbound marketing
- website design

Question:

What is your favourite SaaS website and why? How does it encourage inbound leads to get in touch (calls to action, sign-ups, chatbots) and how do they do a good job of this?

Marking guide:

1 star

- no effort made

3 stars

- picks a well designed site
- focuses somewhat on the inbound marketing features

5 stars

- describes the site's aesthetic and how it is relevant to the customer
- talks through lead gen strategy for the site and why it is great

What is the best type of interview?

The best type of interview is structured, so all candidates get the same questions and experience. To make them even more predictive ensure there is also an element of scenario-based or simulation testing.

This means simulating a real life situation during the interview or by asking them to talk through a case study.

Below is an example case study for a marketing role:

We recommend that your interviews are structured as follows:

- 2-3 rounds
- 1 hour long each
- 2-3 people on interview panel
- Each round consists of: 50% structured interview on skills, 50% case study or simulation
- Make your panels diverse
- Always use a scoring rubric to ensure consistency

An HR SaaS company selling culture and diversity surveys has decided to target selling to charities because they are:

- Intrinsically motivated by D&I and people related issues.
- $\frac{3}{4}$ of charities pay men more than women.
- Typically <500 people with small, centralised HR teams.

1) What additional information would you need up-front to better understand the target market? Is it an attractive market?

2) From a Digital Marketing perspective, talk through 3 tactics you would implement as part of the marketing strategy.

3) Talk through a piece of content for this campaign. What would its theme and title be? Where would you share it and in what format?

Checklist: assessing candidates

Below is a checklist of the items that are important at this stage. We highly recommend that you use the most predictive methods at your disposal as early in the recruitment process as you can.

- Come to terms with letting go of the CV.
- Pick assessments based on how predictive they are. We recommend 3-5 work samples first.
- Define the number and type of interviews that you want to run. We recommend 2-3 rounds, all of them with some element of work simulation.
- Build your work samples based on the skills you need.
- Build your interview questions using the same methodology

Not being CV-driven may feel a little but uncomfortable at first, but it is research proven to be more predictive of hiring. Give it a try - once you've experienced it, you'll never want to go back.

5. How to review and interview candidates



The impact of our biases is huge

and just being aware of them doesn't help us

Unconscious bias is a serious issue in recruitment. These biases essentially add noise to the recruitment decision-making process, making us feel comfortable and like we are using our best judgement. The research in fact shows the opposite is true and that biases degrade our decisions no matter how cognisant of our biases we think we are.⁵

Here are the most common types of biases you might find in your recruitment process:

Affinity bias



Stereotype bias



Halo effect



Group think



Confirmation bias



Telling yourself not to be biased just does not work. The only way to remove this noise from your process is to design it out. Therefore we recommend that you follow a set of de-biasing methodologies to ensure you get the best results.

How to remove bias

There are 4 main methods to systematically remove bias from your recruitment reviewing process. Each one combats a different set of biases:

1. Anonymisation



This is the most well known method of de-biasing and simply involves removing all personally identifiable information from an application. Name, email, university, hobbies, professional bodies, last place of employment etc.

Biases removed: affinity bias, stereotype bias

2. Chunking



Probably the hardest method to get your head around. This involves cutting each application into chunks and then comparing chunks across candidates, rather than reviewing a full application in one go.

Biases removed: confirmation bias, halo effect

3. Randomisation



The order that things appear to us matters. For example, when presented with three options, we are much more likely to pick the middle option. By jumbling up the order in which chunks are reviewed, order effects are averaged out.

Biases removed: ordering effects (noble laureate, hangry)

4. Wisdom of the Crowd



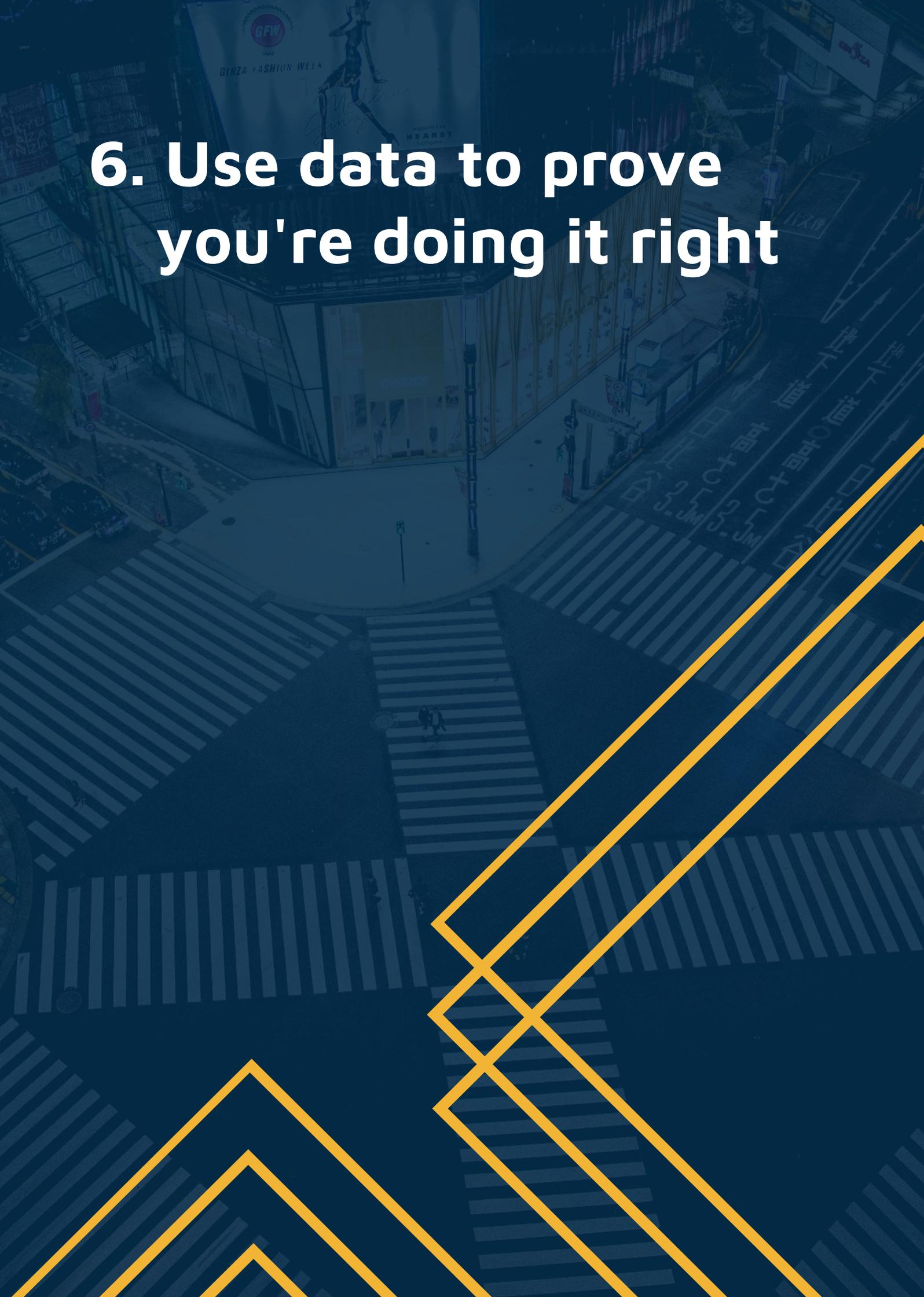
Getting more than one person to review each chunk helps to average out subjectivity and get to a truer assessment of merit. The ideal number is three people reviewing with diminishing returns as you add more reviewers.

Biases removed: affinity bias, subjectivity

Checklist: reviewing candidates

Below is a checklist of the items that are important at this stage. We highly recommend that you used anonymised, de-biasing methods to make your reviews more objective.

- Remove all identifying information from applications (names, schools, hobbies etc.)
- Split up applicants into randomised chunks so that each section can be reviewed on its own.
- Make sure review guides and marking rubrics are clearly defined and given to reviewers.
- Select reviewers and interviewers from a diverse slice of your organisation (different seniorities, functions, gender etc.)
- Review all candidates, invite the top 5 to interview (without peaking at their CV).
- Perform interviews, focusing on case studies and simulations. Submit scores without discussing.

An aerial photograph of a city street intersection, likely in Tokyo, showing a large pedestrian crosswalk with white stripes. The image is overlaid with a dark blue semi-transparent layer. In the top left, there is a sign for 'GINZA FASHION WEEK' with a 'GFW' logo and a 'HEARST' logo. The text '6. Use data to prove you're doing it right' is written in large, white, bold font across the upper portion of the image. In the bottom right corner, there are several thick, yellow, overlapping geometric lines forming a stylized pattern.

6. Use data to prove you're doing it right

You can't fix what you can't measure

so collect the data you need

Like any business decision, you need data to back up your strategy and demonstrate its effectiveness. Human Resources has traditionally relied on a rather boring set of reactive, trailing indicators focused solely around the efficiency of the hiring process (e.g. time to hire, volume of applicants). We see this as the minimum baseline of what a progressive recruitment team should be doing, but there's so much more that can be done:



- Process effectiveness data
- Process transparency data
- Process efficiency data

Start with the base of the pyramid and ensure that data is being collected and monitored for each of the groupings:

Efficiency data - is my process efficient and productive?

metrics: time to hire, applicant volumes etc.

Transparency data - are candidates able to show their best?

metrics: equal opportunity groups throughout process

Effectiveness data - am I hiring great people who can do the job?

metrics: predictive validity, interview conversions etc.

Transparency gets the best out of candidates

Creating a level playing field for all, as well as de-stressing and ensuring you know what you are testing for, creates an environment where candidates can thrive and perform at their best.

A fair and transparent process also ensures that everyone has the same chance and is not hindered by our ingrained biases, ultimately bringing diversity into your organisation.

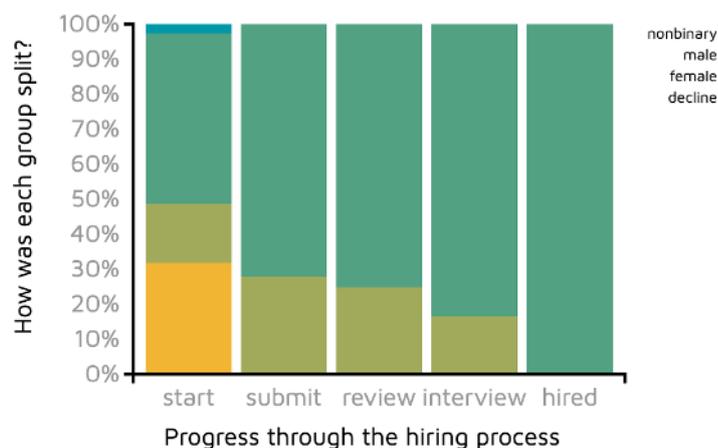
But this can be easier said than done, so measuring and monitoring the diversity of your applicants is critical.

1) At the very start of your process, collect your candidates' equal opportunities information. We recommend the following: gender, age grouping, ethnicity, disability status, socioeconomic indicators.

2) Measure these at each stage of the application process. Ensure that this information is only ever shared on aggregate and not on an individual basis.

3) Monitor your funnel for each role and look for drop-offs that may need to be addressed.

Gender



How effective is my process?

Unlike a marketing department, Return on Investment (ROI) is rarely measured in a talent acquisition team. When it is measured it is often linked to candidate volumes, rather than the actual performance of the hired candidates.

The ultimate feedback on your recruitment process is the performance review scores that hired candidates get 6-12 months after they have started. This is the holy grail but can be quite hard to implement in practice. However, there is a whole host of intermediate steps we recommend you take to understand the effectiveness of your process:

1. Ensure that you are using a data-driven assessment process. This enables you to compare like-for-like across candidates.
2. For each question or application chunk record the average, standard deviation and look at the distribution of scores. You want the average score to fall in the middle of the scale, with a nice normal distribution.
3. If using multiple reviewers, monitor the subjectivity of questions by calculating the average difference for review scores of the same answers.
4. Record interview conversion rates to understand if you are shortlisting effectively.
5. Compare scores between rounds to see if they predict future performance.



Checklist: using data effectively

Below is a checklist of the items that are important at this stage. We highly recommend that you let the data guide your recruitment process decisions, rather than your gut or what happened in the past.

- Use quantitative scoring methods instead of 'gut' or 'fit' so that you can compare candidates more fairly.
- Collect people's equal opportunities information at the start of your process. Monitor it in aggregate to ensure fairness of your process.
- Track the effectiveness of your work sample questions. Measure the average, standard deviation and how well they correlate to later stage scores.
- Measure time to hire and number of applicants (but don't obsess over these metrics)
- If you see a problem, change your process.

Appendix



Sources and further reading

1. The Ladders, (2018), 'Eye-tracking study', The Ladders, [online], Available at: <http://go.theladders.com/rs/539-NBG-120/images/EyeTracking-Study.pdf> [Accessed 01/05/2019].
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3. Gaucher, D., Friesen, J., & Key, A. C. (2011). Evidence That Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(1), 109-128.
4. Schmidt, Frank. (2016). The Validity and Utility of Selection Methods in Personnel Psychology: Practical and Theoretical Implications of 100 Years of Research Findings.
5. Uhlmann, E.L., & Cohen, G.L. (2007). "I think it, therefore it's true": Effects of self-perceived objectivity on hiring discrimination.



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