

The science of attraction

How HR directors can apply behavioural science to their job adverts to better attract talent

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I: Foreword by Hymans Robertson

HR is by its nature a long-term game. In my role as people director at Hymans Robertson, my team and I are tasked with the need to bring in and develop talent, build a shared organisational purpose, and create an organisation that is fit for the future.

Each of these tasks has its own set of challenges. CEOs and others in the top team are rarely experts on many of these workplace issues. The HR director is expected to be the expert. But in some areas there is a lack of evidence on what actually works. Here at Hymans Robertson we decided to commission research which is a step towards providing the evidence that HR directors need.

Our research focuses on talent acquisition. Whether managed in-house or with support from agencies or search firms, talent acquisition is a sizeable cost and effort for any organisation. While there's some good evidence on how to assess candidates once they have applied for a role, I've found there is much less on how to attract the right applicants in the first place.

Our report firstly summarises current available evidence for the best ways to attract talent and has used this evidence to develop a new model for HR directors. The HIRE-ME model can be used by HR directors as a day-to-day point of reference, so they can attract a diverse workforce with the right skills, attributes and cultural fit for their organisation.

Secondly we provide the results of an evidenced-based and behavioural science experiment looking at the ongoing challenge of attracting the right talent into the organisation. We show the small changes that can make a big difference: for instance how changing a handful of words in job adverts can increase applications from high quality candidates by over 12 per cent.

We hope you find our report's insights useful while planning your talent acquisition strategy.

Gill Tait
People Director
gill.tait@hymans.co.uk
T 0141 5667 781



About Hymans Robertson

Founded in 1921, Hymans Robertson is one of the longest established independent actuarial firms in the UK. We deliver a full range of services including actuarial, HR consulting, investment consulting, enterprise risk management, third-party pensions administration and communications consulting. Our client base includes FTSE 100, FTSE 250, privately owned firms and financial institutions. We're also recognised leaders in the field of public sector pensions.

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What is behavioural science?

Behavioural science is the science of what we do and how we can change it. It brings together psychology, neuroscience and economics to understand how we make decisions and behave in the ways that we do – and how to predict and influence this. Behavioural science reveals that the majority of our actions are driven by automatic, instinctive and intuitive thought processes. Even important decisions that we believe people make in a reflective and rational manner are often made quickly and influenced more by context than reasoned thought. Insights from behavioural science are increasingly being applied to good effect – with the UK leading the way. There is lots of potential to apply these insights to improve HR processes generally and talent acquisition specifically.

2: Are your job adverts fit for purpose?

Whatever type of business organisation, success depends in large part on the strengths of its workforce. So it is surprising that the primary way of attracting new staff into the organisation – the job advert – is based on such little evidence of what actually works.

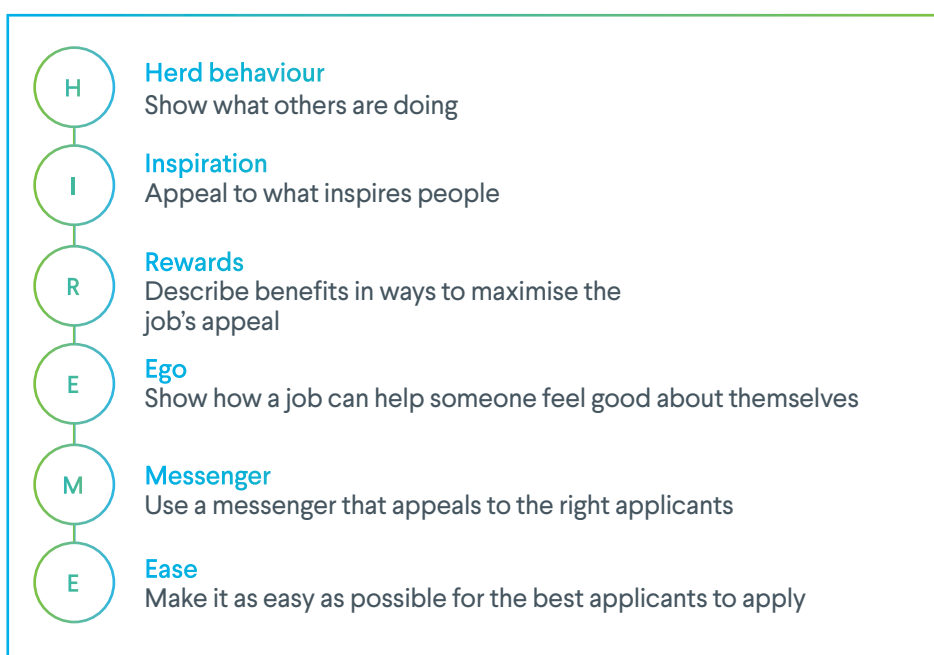
Job adverts are still the primary way of attracting talent. But ask yourself: when did you last review how your organisation's job advert was set out? Do you routinely copy previous job adverts as a standard template? Do you tailor adverts to the specific types of applicants you want to attract?

And does any of this sound like it much matters anyway? Surely the important factors in attracting talent are the size of your benefits package and your employee brand?

In fact these seemingly small details do matter. A lot. We show how simple changes to how a job advert is set out can make a substantial difference to the number of good quality applicants.

This report reviews the evidence to find out what we already know about how to use job adverts to attract the right staff. Because there is little published evidence to draw on, we take two approaches to fill this gap.

First, we review what behavioural science tells us about job applicants and the application process. We find a lot of useful evidence that HR directors and teams can easily include in their recruitment processes. We summarise this in the new HIRE-ME framework:



Second, we generate new robust evidence of low or no cost improvements that HR directors can easily implement in their own organisations. We report findings from our experiment in 2016 with behavioural scientists from the London School of Economics and Political Science. The findings are startling:

- We can make job adverts around **12 per cent more attractive** to desirable candidates simply by presenting the benefits in terms of prevention (“benefits designed for your financial security”) rather than “great opportunity”-type messages more typically seen in job adverts.
 - We can achieve a similar improvement in a job’s appeal by shifting a little more of the benefits package from salary into pensions, while keeping the overall employer costs the same. This makes an **8 per cent improvement**.
 - More applicants do not mean a reduced quality of applicant. We can be sure that these simple changes should increase the number of good quality applicants
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Finally, we conclude by encouraging HR directors and their teams to build on this experiment so they know what works best for their own organisation.

3: Attracting talent: it's time to look more closely

Many organisations state that their staff are their biggest asset. So it is surprising that the primary way of attracting new staff into the organisation is based on such little evidence of what works.

Getting the job advert right is a key business challenge for HR directors and their teams. Job adverts remain the primary way of attracting talent into an organisation, as even employees hired through recruitment agencies are typically shown an advert or job description.

Yet the job advert is an undervalued part of the talent acquisition process. Organisations rarely give this much thought, probably instead re-using similar job adverts for a number of years and for a wide range of

posts. If the advert is reviewed from time to time, its formatting is likely to be based on advice from well-intentioned colleagues or top tips from a business magazine that land on their desk.

We should move beyond received wisdom and hearsay about what job adverts should look like. This report reviews the evidence to find out what we already know about how to use job adverts to attract the right staff.

Case study: using cue words and phrases

Experiments in the US in 2009 showed that the inclusion of certain cue words and phrases in job adverts can attract different types of candidate with certain characteristics (Newman & Lyon, 2009). For instance:

- To attract people who perceive themselves as intelligent, use words like challenging and stimulating and say the job requires quick thinking and knowledge.
- To attract people who perceive themselves as conscientious, use words like reliable, works hard, and well organised.
- To attract candidates from minority ethnic groups, use words such as innovative or progressive workplaces.

Evidence review: what makes an effective job advert

Research has proven what HR directors would observe as obvious: that whether a person applies for a job – and ultimately whether a job offer is accepted – is strongly related to the job's perceived attractiveness (Uggerslev et al, 2012). Attractiveness is made up of a range of factors including pay and benefits, colleagues, location, job autonomy, the organisation's image, advancement opportunities and organisational reputation.

Many of these attributes are not readily amenable to change. For instance, it would be impractical to change an organisation's location, or tricky to quickly alter its public image. Others factors are easier for HR directors to change. These are the focus of this report: parts of the talent acquisition process that an HR director can easily influence. This includes precisely how a job advert is described and low or no cost adaptations to the benefits package.

So, what do we already know about what works? While experiments in this area are limited, some in the US in 2009 showed that using certain cue words and phrases can attract different types of candidate with certain characteristics (Newman & Lyon, 2009). For instance, to attract candidates who perceive themselves as intelligent, it is useful to use words like challenging and stimulating and say the job requires quick thinking, intelligence and knowledge. Similarly, candidates from minority ethnic groups are attracted to innovative or progressive workplaces.


A UK study in 2015 to recruit teachers found that changes to the wording of job adverts can have a large effect on the number of people interested in the position. The study found it nearly twice as effective to describe the teaching posts as a 'challenge' rather than the more typical pro-social framing (Behavioural Insights Team, 2015).

Case study: communicating what 'people like me' are doing

An experiment in 2015 demonstrated that feeding back the number of people who have started applying for a particular job can increase total application rates (Gee, 2015).

This simple step signals in a subtle way that the job is desirable, rather than the plausible opposite effect that someone may wish to avoid roles with a greater number of competing applicants. Interestingly, in this experiment the increase was mostly among women.

In a separate research project in 2008, people were found to be more attracted to an employer if they perceive current employees as similar to themselves (Devendorf & Highhouse, 2008).



Other research reviews suggest organisations should direct initial recruitment efforts at fostering applicants' perceptions of how they 'fit' with the organisation in terms of compatible goals and values. This was identified as the most important factor in a role's perceived attractiveness. Interestingly, the second most important factor was how personable the recruiting staff were (Uggerslev et al, 2012).

But this is about as far as existing robust evidence takes us. Reviews of HR management literature identify limited evidence on the impact of various options in presenting a job advert, while acknowledging their potential importance (Breaugh, 2015). While there's no

shortage of books summarising HR best practice, one recently updated review notes that research of recruitment practices has been less systematic and less informative than the complexity of the topic requires (Gatewood et al, 2015). There is very little looking in detail at the many thoughts and decisions potential applicants make throughout the process (Lievens & Chapman, 2010).

This means HR directors have little evidence to rely on when drafting a most effective job advert to attract a diverse workforce with the right skills, attributes and cultural fit with the organisation. This report begins to fill this gap in two ways:

- First, we draw on the latest insights from behavioural sciences. The job application process involves multiple judgement and decisions that influence whether a potential applicant does or does not apply for a role. Behavioural science can help steer us towards more effective ways to inform and influence these decisions.
- Second, to run robust experiments to test what works. HR directors need more than hearsay and received wisdom if they are to be confident that their talent acquisition strategies are effective in attracting the right candidates. We summarise new research that shows how small changes to how a job's benefits package is described to potential applicants can make a big difference to the number of applicants, while not reducing the quality of applicants.



Attracting the right candidates: quality not quantity

Job adverts aim to attract desirable candidates. Attracting a greater number of applicants is only useful if those candidates are suited to the role. A greater number of unsuitable applicants is a waste of time for everyone involved.

The characteristics of a desirable applicant will naturally vary a lot depending on the role and organisation. Desirable characteristics are likely to include particular knowledge and skills. Some roles

may look more for learning agility, friendliness, or leadership qualities. Other more universal desirable characteristics include those associated with passion and perseverance.

The recommendations in this report focus on attracting a greater number of applicants with these types of desirable characteristics, rather than simply a greater number of applications.

Case study: framing job adverts to attract more candidates

A study by the UK Government's Behavioural Insights Team found that changes to the wording of job adverts for teachers can have a large effect on the number of people interested in the position (Behavioural Insights Team, 2015).

The study found that framing the teaching posts as a challenge ("are you up for a challenge?") were almost twice as effective as the more typical pro-social framing ("are you ready to make a difference?") in potential applicants seeking further information about the roles.

The researchers speculate that this isn't because the greater number of applicants are not pro-social – i.e. the wrong type of people. They suggest this is because the most likely applicants already identify as pro-social, so mentioning the challenge aspect of the role is in addition.

4: The biased mind: better job applicants through behavioural science

There is broad consensus in psychology that people – all of us, all of the time – make judgements and decisions using two systems of thinking (Kahneman, 2011). Sometimes this is ‘thinking’ in the everyday way we use that term: deliberative, reflective and effortful.

For example, like when multiplying 17×13 . This type of thinking is hard and is tiring, so our capacity to engage in it is limited. It’s difficult to spend even a few minutes focusing attention in a concerted manner.

Most of the time however we use another way of thinking, with much less involvement from our deliberative and effortful thought systems. Instead our minds operate in automatic mode. Our judgements and decisions are effortless, fast and outside voluntary control. For example, when multiplying 2×2 the answer 4 comes to mind automatically and without effort.

This automatic thinking is easy. And it is really useful. It allows us to make hundreds of judgements and decisions every day without wasting scarce mental effort. For instance, commuters don’t need to concentrate on their route to work every morning – it’s automatic. Although we are perfectly capable of thinking through our precise journey route, we simply don’t need to.

‘Automatic’ decision-making

So how do our automatic processes make decisions? Rather than weighing the pros and cons of every judgement or decision, they instead rely on mental short-cuts or rules of thumb. These are either ingrained or learnt over time. And these usually serve us well. For example, humans have an innate herd

mentality: we copy the behaviour of others without consciously thinking about it. Imagine if, on that journey to work, the crowd around you at a railway station walks to a different exit than usual. It’s sensible to follow them without yourself checking why. Probably the usual exit is blocked.

However sometimes these mental shortcuts can let us down. For example, what if the crowd at the railway station is heading to a special event that you’re not attending. You’d follow them for no reason. The herd behaviour that usually serves you well has on this occasion made you act irrationally. You’ve figuratively (and in this instance literally) been led astray. This is even more likely to happen when we’re tired or under stress – when our ‘mind is on other things’.



Appealing to our mental shortcuts

These processes of automatic thinking are not minor or scattered. The mental shortcuts we all use all of the time are systematic, regular, and can have massive importance when making major decisions. None of this is new: this has always been the case for how humans make judgements and decisions. It's just that we've only recently understood this.

Psychologists and other behavioural scientists have made major advances in the past 40 years in understanding what these mental short cuts are and how they affect our day to day decisions, judgements and behaviour.

More recently, within just the last decade, behavioural scientists have developed a set of approaches to move beyond merely understanding these mental shortcuts, and to actively apply these to a range of challenges. This began in earnest following publication in 2008 of an influential book, Nudge (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008).

These insights into influencing how people actually think and act and in real life – 'behavioural insights' – are increasingly being applied to good effect. The UK government is a world leader in systematically applying these insights to persistent challenges such as what we eat and the plans we make for our retirement (Dolan et al, 2010).

Opportunities for HR directors

This is often quite big news to people. We assume we behave rationally following careful thought, especially for important decisions in life such as our jobs. The breakthroughs of Kahneman and others has provided a consensus among behavioural scientists that this is not the case.

The downside of accepting how 'irrational' human behaviour is that it makes the world seem a lot more complicated. If people don't behave rationally, it is less straightforward to influence them in job choices or elsewhere.

There's truth in this, but also a big opportunity. Going with the grain of how people actually behave in real life provides a new set of tools to influence people's behaviour – including choice of jobs. We can use the quirks of human decision-making to help the right people make positive decisions.

The new tools in our toolbox can sometimes seem commonsensical and minor; other times perhaps a bit quirky. Importantly they often provide low cost solutions that are easy to build into existing practices. This does not mean that information, incentives or other approaches designed to appeal to rational response will always fail. It instead means we should apply a behavioural lens to these too, while also considering other ways to influence people's judgements and decisions.

Behavioural scientists have identified dozens of mental shortcuts that influence so many of our day-to-day decisions – including important decisions such as what jobs we apply for. Ten of these most relevant to talent acquisition are listed in the annex.

This report goes on to set out precisely how we can apply these mental shortcuts to help good applicants apply for the right jobs. We draw on approaches that are grounded in behavioural science theory and evidence.

5: HIRE-ME: a new framework for HR directors

We have developed this new tool for HR directors: the HIRE-ME framework. Each part of HIRE-ME is simple to implement. These should combine to have a big impact on attracting the right types of applicants to the organisation.

Click the button below to view the full HIRE-ME tool.



6: Attracting applicants by reframing rewards: our 2016 experiment

The HIRE-ME framework sets out simple actions HR directors can take to attract good quality job applicants. While these actions are grounded in behavioural science, the evidence is limited for what works in the specific context of attracting talent through better job adverts.

In autumn 2016 we partnered with behavioural scientists from the London School of Economics and Political Science to test some of these approaches in robust experiments. We focused on the 'R' in the HIRE-ME framework – looking at two aspects of how rewards are described and packaged.

The research was a randomised controlled trial, the 'gold standard' for evaluations (Haynes et al, 2012). In September 2016, 800 people took part in an online experiment, using a system run by Oxford University. They were randomly assigned to each see a different job advert. We tested six job advert variants in total, so around 133 people saw each advert.

We then asked a number of questions about how attracted they are to the job and questions about themselves such as their age, gender and measures of how desirable they were as an applicant.

Framing as promotion or prevention

The first part of the experiment tested if describing – or 'framing' – the benefits package in terms of either an opportunity or promotion, or instead as prevention or security, attracts greater numbers or quality of applicants. The jobs' benefits packages, and in particular the employer pension contributions, were framed either as:

- Opportunity: "benefits designed to help you reach your goals for the future, to make your retirement everything you dream of"
- Prevention: "benefits designed for your financial security, to take the anxiety from your retirement planning".

Ensuring job adverts attract high quality applicants

Job adverts should attract high quality applicants, not high volumes of unsuitable applicants.

The characteristics of a high quality applicant will naturally vary a lot depending on the role and organisation. In our experiment we measured common indicators of what makes for a high quality applicant.

A fairly universal set of desirable characteristics are those associated with passion and perseverance – 'grit'. This is described as a combination of passion, which is the consistency of pursuing an interest over long periods; and perseverance, the ability to carry on through setbacks, frustration or boredom (Duckworth, 2016).

Our experiment used a measure of grit called the 'grit scale'. This is available from Professor Angela Duckworth: <http://angeladuckworth.com/grit-scale/>. We also measured financial literacy and educational qualifications.

We found that, for adverts referring to benefits generally rather than pensions specifically, it is better to frame these in terms of prevention rather than promotion. **This difference is about 12 per cent – a statistically significant and large improvement simply by changing a few words.**

Once a pension is specifically mentioned, people like it equally regardless of how it is framed. However, there is a good reason to suggest prevention-framing is generally better. This is because men and women respond to this similarly, in terms of their positive perceptions of the company. This contrasts to framing as opportunity, which appeals more to men. Organisations that want to attract people equally, or to increase the number of women in their workforce, should use prevention framing.

Adapting the benefits package

The second part of the experiment tested if small adaptations to the benefits package itself, while not changing the total costs to the employer, impact the quality and number of applicants. We tested the following variants of the employer's pension contributions:

- Pension not mentioned at all, but implied as an employer contribution of four per cent
- Employer pension contribution specified as four per cent
- Employer pension contribution specified as ten per cent, with equivalent reduction in salary to keep the benefits package broadly the same.

Stated behaviour can be very different to actual behaviour

Part way through the experiment, participants were invited to earn a small amount of money (£1) by emailing a code to a member of the research team. The email address wasn't provided. Participants would need to track this down themselves, probably via an internet search.

This was a deliberate test of perseverance. This sits alongside the more rigorous measure of passion and perseverance: the 'grit scale', which relies on self-assessment of personality type.

We found that people's stated behaviour is different to actual behaviour. People who self-assess as gritty didn't do better at an actual test of perseverance than those who self-assessed as less gritty.

This echoes similar research across social science. This isn't because we lie. It's explained in good part because much of our behaviour is outside of our conscious awareness.

Prevention or opportunity framing

Part way through the experiment, participants were invited to earn a small amount of money (£1) by emailing a We contrasted messages framed as prevention or promotion. This is because the psychological theory of regulatory focus holds that human motivation is rooted in the approach of pleasure and avoidance of pain i.e. it differentiates a promotion focus from a prevention focus (Florack, 2013).

For example, a person can become wealthier in their retirement by either saving into a pension or otherwise putting money aside, or refraining from wasting money day-to-day.

People can be naturally predisposed more towards one or the other. They can also be influenced by situational factors such as how messages are presented when people make choices - for instance in whether or not to apply for a job. This is what we tested in our experiment.

We found that people prefer a job with a package featuring a higher proportion of benefits as employer pension contributions, even if this means a lower salary. **The difference is about 8 per cent – a significant and substantial increase.** In addition, we can be reassured that higher pension benefits do not make the organisation come across as less risk-taking or dynamic. This is especially true for men.

This means that organisations offering a relatively high pension should make sure to mention this. This includes public sector employers who may offer relatively competitive pensions compared to salary. Organisations with a low pension currently should consider increasing it, while keeping the overall package broadly at the same cost.

For both parts of the experiment, we monitored if higher numbers of applicants reduced the quality of applicants. We did this by looking at a commonly desirable set of characteristics associated with passion and perseverance – ‘grit’. We found that more applicants does not mean a reduced quality of applicants in terms of grit. We saw similar results for financial literacy and educational qualifications. This is a reassuring finding as it means **changes to how the benefits are framed and to the benefits package will attract higher numbers of desirable candidates.**

7: Conclusion

Businesses often say that their staff are their most valuable resource. The HIRE-ME framework sets out an evidence-based approach to attracting the best staff.

In our experiments looking at how rewards are framed – the R in the HIRE-ME framework – we’ve shown that simple and seemingly irrelevant changes informed by behavioural science can actually make a big difference to the number of quality job applicants.

But it’s rare for talent acquisition processes to be tested in such a robust way. Like other experienced professionals, HR directors often feel they have a good understanding of what works, and use this understanding to devise plans. However, we should recognise that confident predictions by experts frequently turn out to be incorrect.

There are many fields in which testing is now common practice. The most robust form of testing, randomised controlled trials, is the way all new medical treatments are evaluated. However, many doctors resisted these trials when they were first introduced, believing

instead that their own personal judgement was sufficient to decide if a treatment worked or not. This is now unthinkable.

We encourage HR directors to apply a similar ‘test and learn’ approach, to see what works best for their organisation and for particular types of applicants. We can then move beyond a reliance on anecdotes, peer-to-peer learning or the latest business trend.

HR directors could explore opportunities to run their own experiments, perhaps with real life job adverts to see what works. There’s help available: see for example this step-by-step guide to business experiments from the Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2011/03/a-step-by-step-guide-to-smart-business-experiments>

Applying evidence like Google

Laszlo Bock, senior vice president for people and operations at Google, has taken an evidence based approach to Google’s selection process (Bock, 2015). This includes steps to mitigate the mental shortcuts that may lead people astray across the recruitment process.

Google’s evidence-based approach means that it now bans brainteaser questions and other types of selection tests that may appear valid but actually do not help recruit the right staff.

Google instead uses structured interviews as part of a combination of selection approaches. These include involving subordinates and colleagues from other parts of the business in the interview process, rather than the more usual process of leaving the decision to the recruiting manager.

All this was driven not by management preference or fad, but by evidence of what works to attract the best staff.

8: References

We recommend the following recent papers for further reading on opportunities for behavioural science to contribute to a range of challenges faced by HR directors and their teams:

Our minds at work: developing the behavioural science of HR. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2014 <http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/research/minds-work-hr.aspx>

HR for Humans: how behavioural economics can reinvent HR. Deloitte Review Issue 18, 2016 <http://dupress.com/articles/behavioral-economics-evidence-based-hr-management/>

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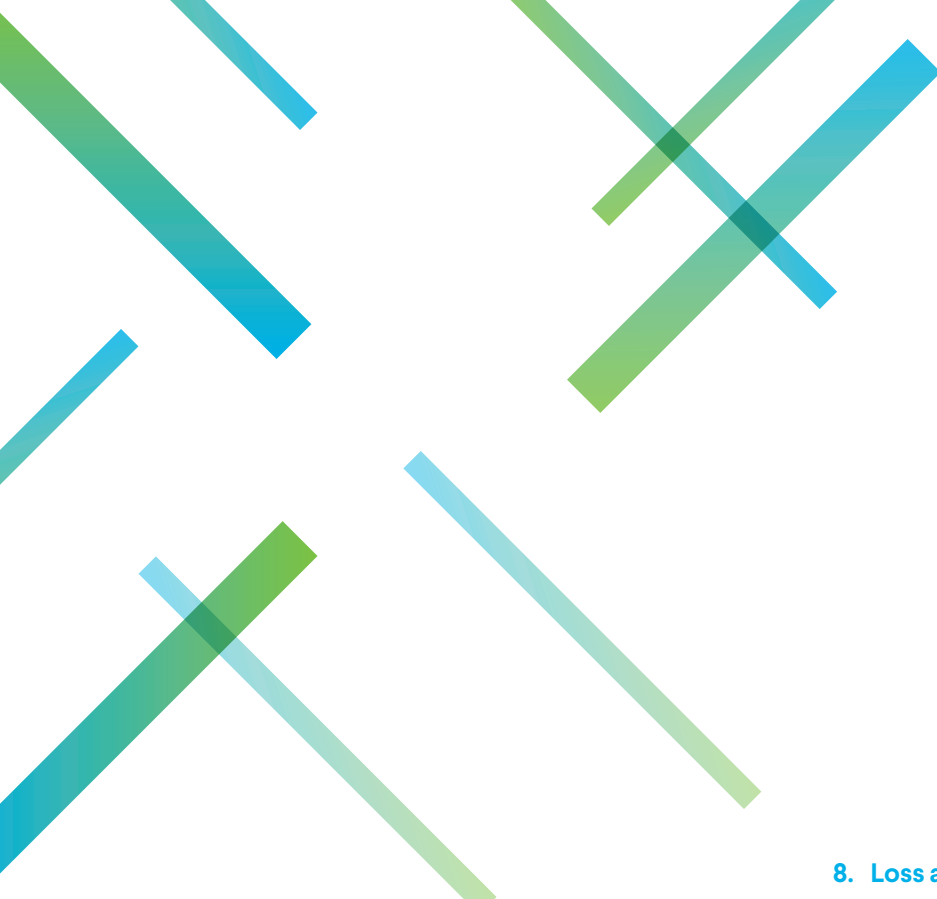
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Annex: behavioural biases

Behavioural scientists have identified dozens of common behavioural biases ('mental shortcuts') that influence much of our behaviour much of the time. These are the ten behavioural biases most relevant to job applicants.

- 1. Satisficing' (or making do):** We tend to make decisions by 'satisficing', which combines sufficing and satisfying. This is rather than making the best decision i.e. optimising.
For job seeking, this means we may limit our job searches to a small number of familiar sources. Conversely, we may put-off accepting a good job offer through fear of missing a better one.
- 2. Status quo bias:** We prefer things to stay the same by doing nothing or by sticking with a decision made previously. We feel greater regret for bad outcomes that result from new actions taken than for bad outcomes that are the consequence of inaction.
For job seeking, this means we tend to stick with our current occupational field i.e. with decisions we have made previously.
- 3. Availability bias:** We make judgements about the likelihood of an event based on how easily an instance comes to mind or from our own personal experiences – rather than other facts.
For job seeking, this means we may be attracted to a company or to a specific role by what most easily comes to mind about that role or company.
- 4. Relying on emotions:** We rely on good or bad feelings experienced in relation to a stimulus e.g. our emotional response to a company. We are more likely to rely on our emotions when we have limited time or mental energy for deeper thought.
For job seeking, this means we may make snap decisions about which jobs to apply for, especially if quickly scanning job adverts.
- 5. Self-image:** We have a powerful desire to maintain a positive self-image and to act in a way that is consistent with our self-image and our beliefs.
For job seeking, this means we may apply for a role that helps us feel good about ourselves, and reflect to others an impression of who we are.



6. Social norms: We are heavily influenced by what we perceive others around us do, especially people similar to us.

For job seeking, this means we may be more interested in a role or company if we perceive other people like us are also interested.

7. Limited mental bandwidth: Our conscious thought processes can easily become overloaded. Seemingly irrelevant details that make a task more challenging or effortful can therefore make the difference between doing something or not.

For job seeking, this means that even minor improvements in the process for applying for a job, or in spotting the key characteristics of a job, may make a big difference on applications.

8. Loss aversion: We tend to feel losses more acutely than gains of the same value, making us more risk averse than assumptions of fully rational behaviour would suggest.

For job seeking, this means people may be more attracted to a job's benefits package that is perceived as helping to avoid loss than as providing a gain of the same value.

9. Prevention-framed messages: We can be differently motivated by messages framed as prevention of harm or promotion of benefit. We may be predisposed to one or the other.

For job seeking, our experiment suggests that people are more attracted to a job when its benefits package is described as providing security than as an opportunity.

10. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Psychologists talk about two types of motivation. First, 'carrot-and-stick' extrinsic (external) motivations, such as money and power. Second, intrinsic (internal) motivation such as enjoyment or achievement. It may be the most desirable candidates are those motivated less solely by money.

For job seeking, this means a job that stresses intrinsic rewards such as self-improvement and enjoyment may attract applicants who are motivated less solely by money.



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