

Identifying Biased Language in Performance Reviews Case Study

The Engagement

The annual performance management evaluation process for a 65,000-employee organization posed open-ended questions to employees, employees' stakeholders, and managers to complete with narrative responses. Because of the open-ended nature of the narrative review, this process likely led to biased assessments, biased language, and ultimately, biased ratings. Exeter was engaged to review managers' written performance narratives evaluating exempt employees across multiple diversity dimensions to identify language used for evaluations. "Are employee performance narratives described differently depending on their diversity dimensions?", was the overarching research question for this engagement.



The Challenge

Open-ended performance narratives invite biased assessments of employees. Unfortunately for this client, open-ended narratives were the exclusive method to evaluate employees, which could have significant impact on compensation, merit, and promotion decisions.



The Approach

Exeter selected nearly 5,000 performance narratives (from 12,000 available) through a randomized sampling process. We grouped these narratives across diversity dimensions, including race/ethnicity, age, function, department, location, and performance rating. Exeter evaluated word count and content consistency, and then searched potentially biased terms from diversity, equity, and inclusion research and our experience.

The Findings

Finding One

With respect to the research question, Exeter found differences in the language used in reviews across diversity dimensions, as well as the frequencies of potentially biased terms used.

Finding Two

Further observations centered on cognitive biases in managers' comments (halo effect, horns effect, recency bias, leniency bias, and strictness bias), and the unexpected similarities in words and phrases used in narratives for the top and average ratings.



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Implications

Based on our findings, Exeter proposed several changes to the client's performance management process. First, the client agreed that replacing the open-ended narratives with a quantifiable and more objective method was necessary to mitigate managers' biases. Additionally, Exeter developed training curricula that the client utilized to train managers on being more aware of their biases and how to mitigate them when assessing employee performance. The client also heeded to Exeter's recommendations to implement multi-rater diverse interview panels, and to hold annual multi-rater/calibration sessions with managers to clarify what good performance reviews look and sound like to ensure consistency across diversity dimensions.