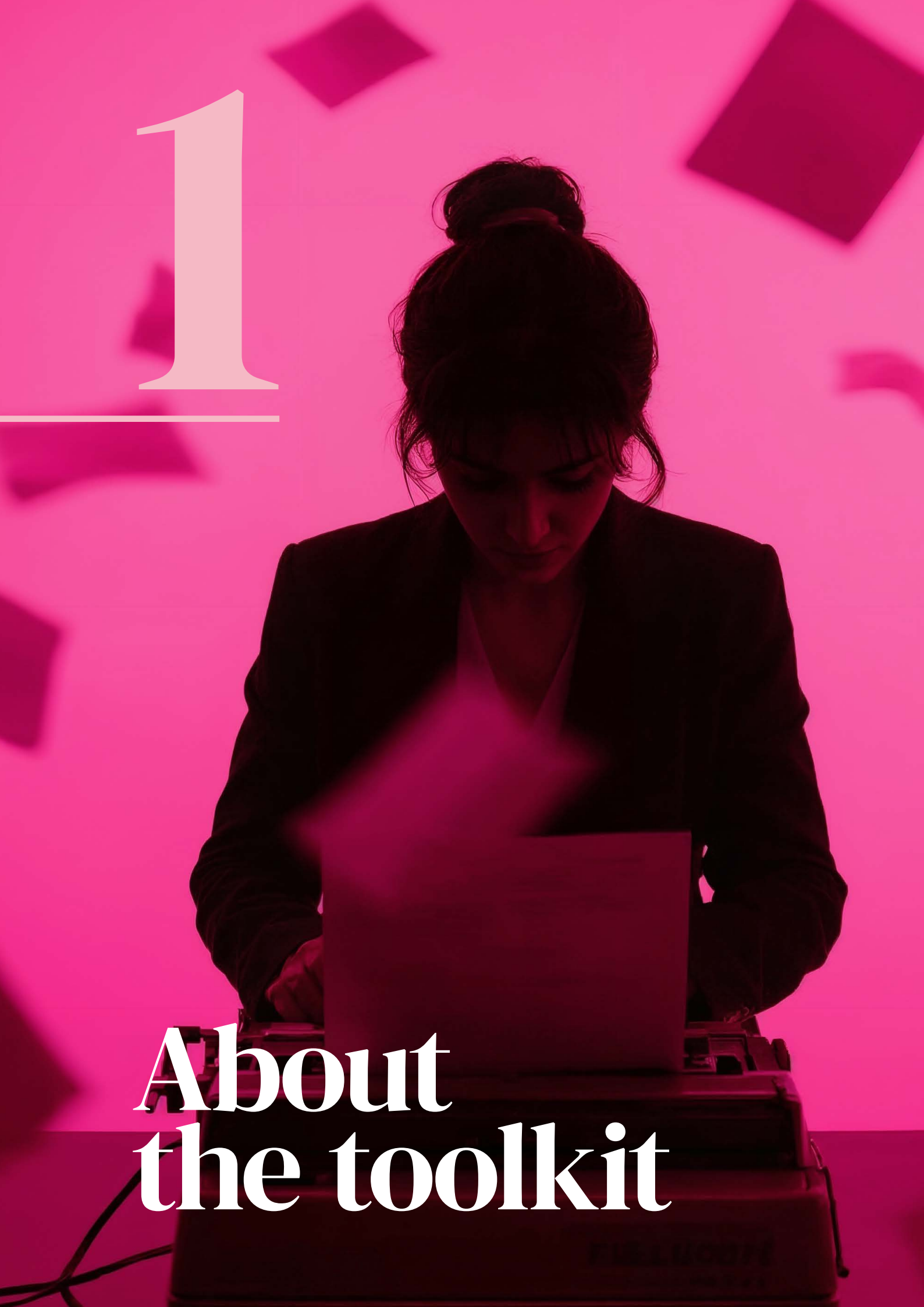




Inclusive Talent Management Toolkit

Promoting Gender Equity
in Recruitment, Selection &
Promotion processes

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About
the toolkit

Purpose & scope

This toolkit was developed as part of the Tallinn University LIFE project “*Inclusive Pathways: Promoting Diversity and Inclusivity in Talent Management*”, organized by **Lysistrata MTÜ**. It was authored and curated by **Katerina Chantzi** under the academic supervision of **Triin Roosalu**, with contributions from students and researchers in the [LIFE program](#).

The purpose of the toolkit is to help organisations **reduce bias and foster inclusive hiring**, with a focus on the STEM sector. It aims to support **HR professionals, hiring managers, and inclusion officers** who wish to review their recruitment, selection, and promotion practices through a gender-inclusive lens.

Drawing on evidence-based research, it translates insights on implicit bias into **concrete, step-by-step strategies** that can be applied throughout the hiring lifecycle, from job advertisements and candidate sourcing to interviews, onboarding, and promotion. It combines theoretical foundations with practical applications, and case studies that demonstrate both challenges and successful interventions.

Who is it for?

- ✓ HR teams
- ✓ DEI professionals
- ✓ Universities
- ✓ Business owners
- ✓ Job seekers

Prerequisites for success

For the toolkit to be truly **effective**, the following are **essential**:



Leadership commitment and cultural shift

Management must actively support inclusive practices beyond surface-level interventions. Inclusion should be seen as a strategic advantage, not just a compliance requirement.



Collaboration across departments

HR professionals need to work closely with department heads, hiring managers, and executives to embed inclusive practices into daily operations and strategic goals.



Continuous monitoring and evaluation

Regular audits, feedback mechanisms, and iterative improvements ensure sustained progress of the entire hiring process, from job posting to final selection and onboarding.

The Benefits of Inclusive Talent Management

Diversity in the workplace is widely recognized as a valuable asset, yet women are significantly underrepresented in leadership, technical, and decision-making roles, particularly in the tech and STEM sectors and continue to face systemic barriers in accessing the labour market and advancing in their careers that not only hinder women's advancement but also stifle organizational growth and innovation.

Diverse teams are proven to perform better, especially in contexts that demand adaptability, creativity, and complex problem-solving.

Did you know?

Companies with gender-diverse executive teams are **21% more likely** to outperform financially.

(McKinsey, 2018)

Mixed-gender teams **consistently outperformed** homogenous ones on tasks requiring collective intelligence.

(Woolley and Malone, 2011)

Diverse groups are more likely to challenge assumptions and consider a broader range of perspectives leading to **more informed, effective outcomes**.

(Phillips K., 2017)

The inclusion of women in design and strategy leads to **more relevant and responsive products** as women significantly influence global purchasing decisions.

(Catalyst, 2020)

Did you know?



In 2024, women in Estonia
would need to work

33 additional days

to earn the same average
salary as men; a reflection of
the 13.1% gender pay gap.

(Statistics Estonia, 2024)



Women comprise **42% of the global workforce** but only **31.7% of senior leadership roles.**

(LinkedIn, 2024)

Why does this happen?



Despite recent progress in recruiting women at senior levels, broader diversity remains limited, in part due to **low turnover rates and a focus on junior-level recruitment** for women.

Glass Ceiling

Women frequently face a “glass ceiling”; invisible barriers and artificial obstacles that prevent women from accessing top decision-making and managerial positions in organizations, both public and private. These reinforce existing power structures and prevent equal career advancement opportunities for women and men (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016).

Gender Stereotypes

Stereotypes, which perceive technical competence as inherently male, continue to influence perceptions and choices well into adulthood. Women are frequently associated with soft skills such as empathy or communication, while technical competence is more readily attributed to men—reinforcing the idea that STEM roles are a better fit for male candidates (Heilman, 2012).

Barriers in STEM Learning

Educational disparities further widen this gap. Gender differences in STEM education can result from unequal access to resources, biased teaching practices, and the reinforcement of limiting social norms within classroom settings. As a result, fewer girls engage with STEM subjects early on, reducing the pipeline of qualified female candidates for these fields.

Invisible Female Role Models

Additionally, the **lack of visible female role models** in tech and leadership amplifies the issue. When young women do not see others like them succeeding in these spaces, it can reinforce the notion that such careers are not for them. Research by Cheryan et al. (2017) highlights how this lack of representation sustains stereotypes and discourages women from entering or remaining in male-dominated industries.

Truly embracing diversity means not just acknowledging these gaps, but actively working to bridge them, could lead to a 3.2–5.5% increase in GDP by 2050 in EU, according to EIGE (2017), to internally transforming the systems where these inequalities manifest most clearly—recruitment, selection, and promotion practices. Equitable hiring processes are not merely operational tools; they are strategic levers for creating more inclusive and dynamic workplaces.



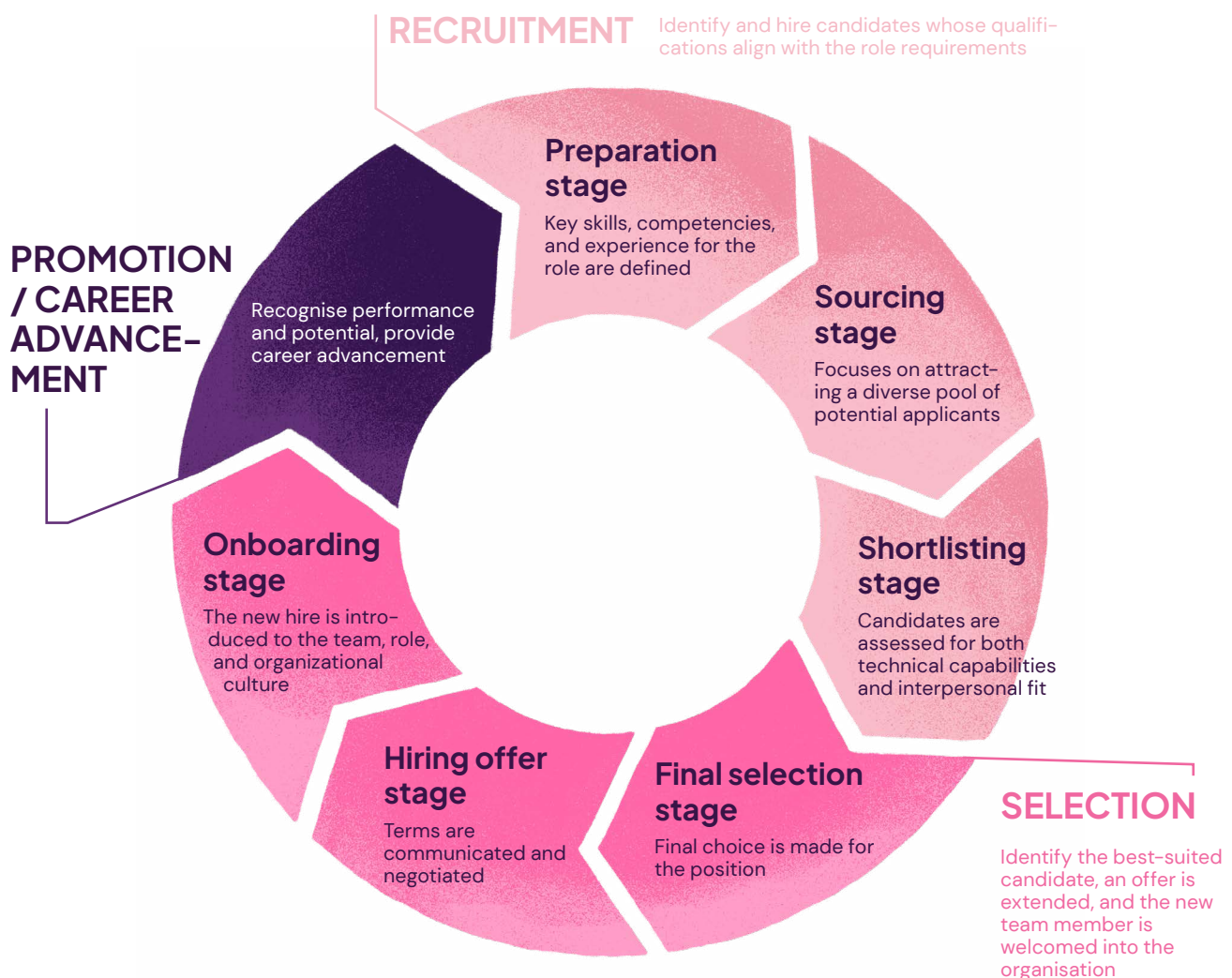
While this toolkit focuses on implicit gender bias, it does not address all forms of bias, such as those related to race, class, age, or disability, which may require complementary tools and approaches. It also does not provide in-depth auditing procedures for AI or automated recruitment systems, which pose their own bias risks. As workplace environments evolve rapidly, meaning the toolkit should be adapted over time to remain relevant and effective within different organisational contexts.

A close-up photograph of two people in business attire shaking hands. The person on the left is wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved button-down shirt. The person on the right is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored shirt. The background is a solid magenta color with several rectangular shapes in various shades of purple and pink floating around, creating a dynamic, abstract effect. A large, light pink number '2' is positioned in the upper left quadrant.

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The Hiring Lifecycle

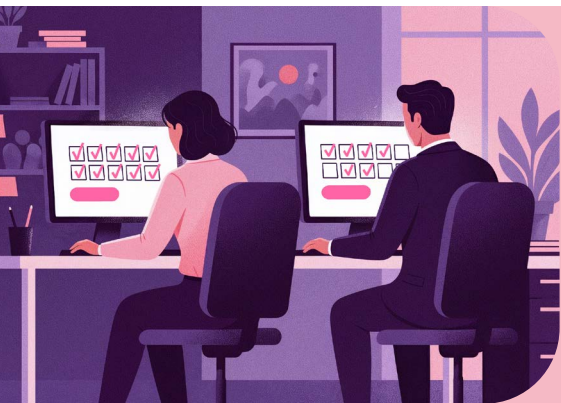
The hiring lifecycle is a **multi-stage process that shapes who joins an organisation and how inclusive the workforce will be**. Each stage presents opportunities for bias, but also levers for equity. We are going to explore each and every stage, as each phase of recruitment is susceptible to implicit bias even though each stage is clearly defined.



Promotion isn't technically part of the hiring lifecycle, as it follows the same steps as any other entry-level hiring. However, we separate it as a distinct stage because there are certain elements unique to this process.

Preparation stage

Anchoring bias



Did you know?

Men tend to apply for roles when they meet approximately 60% of the listed qualifications, whereas women typically apply only if they meet 100%

(Mohr, 2014)

The preparation stage is critical for building an equitable recruitment process, as it defines the role and directly influences who feels eligible and motivated to apply. During this phase, the hiring team identifies the technical and interpersonal skills, experiences, and competencies required for the role. These elements shape the job description and candidate profile, forming the basis for the next steps of the hiring cycle. An inclusive preparation process goes beyond simply identifying requirements. It ensures that job descriptions are realistic, accessible, and designed to welcome a wide range of applicants.

A key cognitive bias that often influences this stage is **anchoring bias**. Anchoring bias occurs when an initial piece of information, such as years of experience, a salary range or a job title, becomes an influential reference point in decision-making that disproportionately shapes expectations. This can lead candidates to disqualify themselves based on arbitrary thresholds, or accept offers that do not reflect their market value or capabilities.

A job ad listing “10+ years of experience” might deter a highly qualified candidate with a non-linear career path, even if their skills align well with the role.

Anchoring bias can also affect **salary setting and negotiation**. Employers may list a lower starting salary assuming candidates will negotiate upwards; but women, due to social norms and the potential for negative judgment, are often less likely to do so. Studies have consistently found significant gender differences in negotiation outcomes. A study by Linda Babcock and Carnegie Mellon University found that 57% of male MBA graduates negotiated their starting salaries, compared to only 7% of female graduates (Babcock & Laschever, 2003).

Moreover, even when women do negotiate, they are less likely to receive favorable outcomes, partly due to the social penalties associated with assertiveness in women (Bowles, Babcock, & McGinn, 2005; Leibbrandt & List, 2014).

Did you know?

Only 4% of women reported receiving higher pay following negotiations, compared to 15% of men

(Glassdoor, 2016)



These patterns are not a reflection of capability or ambition, but rather of **systemic social expectations** that penalize women for self-advocacy. The result is a dynamic in which qualified women may be overlooked or undervalued—not because of a lack of skills, but because of how the hiring process is framed.

To mitigate the effects of anchoring bias, job descriptions should focus on essential skills and competencies for the role, without being anchored by rigid or exclusionary benchmarks. This approach helps candidates evaluate their fit more accurately and with greater confidence apply for the job ads based on their actual capabilities rather than restrictive criteria.

Case study

Job listing for a marketing manager position

	✓ Job posting WITHOUT anchoring bias	✗ Job posting WITH anchoring bias	Comments
Job title & location	Senior Marketing Manager Tallinn (Hybrid – 3 days in office)	Marketing Manager Tallinn (On-site)	✓ Clear but flexible setup ✗ Rigid format may deter candidates seeking flexibility
Salary range	Salary range: €50.000–€65.000	Salary range: €40.000	✓ Transparent range invites negotiation ✗ Low fixed anchor discourages negotiation
About the role	Lead strategic marketing initiatives to grow the customer base and brand impact. Collaborate cross-functionally with design and product.	Own campaign performance from day one in a high-pressure environment. Manage multiple fast-paced campaigns.	✓ Emphasizes teamwork and growth ✗ Anchors role to urgency and high-stress profile qualifications. Anchoring the role to a certain personality type or lifestyle.
Qualifications	What you'll bring: – Experience designing & executing digital campaigns – Team leadership or mentorship experience – Ability to manage multiple projects independently – Strong communication, problem-solving & analytical skills	What you'll need: – Minimum 8 years in digital marketing – Proven leadership in senior roles – Ability to work long hours & meet tight deadlines – High energy, adaptability, and resilience under pressure	✓ Highlights competencies over rigid metrics ✗ Anchored to years, energy bias excludes caregivers, introverts, or non-linear paths
Benefits	What we offer – Competitive salary (based on experience & market data) – Flexible work environment supporting work-life balance – Comprehensive benefits: healthcare, retirement plan, paid vacation	Benefits – Occasional work-from-home days	✓ Language of mutual value and flexibility ✗ Feels minimal, vague, and top-down



Screening and shortlisting stage

Affinity bias

Did you know?

Identical resumes with male names rated more favorably than those with female names, with men perceived as more competent and more hireable despite having the same credentials

(Moss-Racusin et al, 2012)



The screening and shortlisting stage is a critical stage in the hiring process, as applicants move from being potential fits to active candidates for the role. This phase involves multiple steps such as technical assessments, resume reviews, reference checks and interviews, to narrow down a large pool of candidates to a more manageable set before final decision making. Each of these processes holds considerable influence over who advances, and ultimately, who gets hired. Ultimately, this stage helps shape the diversity, quality, and inclusiveness of the final shortlist and, by extension, the composition of future teams.

Resume reviews are often the first step in screening candidates, offering a quick summary of their education, work history, and relevant skills. This stage is used to determine whether applicants meet the basic qualifications for a role and should progress to the next steps, as it holds considerable power and influences the final shortlisting.

Despite their perceived objectivity, resumes often trigger implicit judgments from the moment they are reviewed. Recruiters and hiring managers may form impressions based on seemingly neutral details, such as a candidate's name, gender, age, or the university they attended. Research shows that these minor cues can carry major weight.

Overconfidence bias compounds the issue, as many decision-makers assume they can identify top talent by instinct, dismissing candidates who may not conform to conventional expectations of excellence. These dynamics disproportionately impact women and under-represented groups, who are more likely to have non-linear career paths or present qualifications in less familiar formats.

Additionally, recruiters often rely on gut feelings during early screening, guided by a sense of familiarity or likability. While this may seem efficient, it tends to favor candidates who share similar backgrounds, interests, or communication styles with the reviewer, reinforcing affinity bias.

To counteract these biases, organisations can adopt more inclusive and structured resume screening practices. One particularly impactful best approach is blind recruitment (CIPD, 2015), which removes identifying information from resumes such as names, gender, date of birth, photos, addresses, and even educational institutions. By stripping away these cues, organisations ensure decisions are based solely on qualifications, skills, and experience, rather than on assumptions.

A compelling example comes from Deloitte Australia, which implemented a “blind audition” strategy that excluded names and universities from CVs. As a result, **the number of women hired increased by 44%**, demonstrating how anonymization can lead to meaningful improvements in gender balance (Scheuer, 2023). These changes benefit not only candidates but also organisations, as anonymizing applications broadens the talent pool and redirects attention to merit rather than implicit assumptions.

While blind recruitment isn't a silver bullet, it is a powerful tool. To maximize its impact, it should be combined with other inclusive hiring strategies, such as structured interviews, bias training, and tools like the Gender Decoder which highlights masculine or feminine-coded language in job ads to ensure gender neutral language. Still, the message is clear: when we remove irrelevant identity markers, we create space for skills, potential, and diversity to thrive.



Promotion / Career Advancement

Promotion marks a critical stage in the employee lifecycle where recognition, responsibility, and reward converge. It signifies career growth, increased influence, and greater organizational trust. Beyond salary adjustments and job titles, promotion reflects who is valued, who is seen as capable of leading, and who shapes the organization's future. While efforts to recruit and retain women have improved, many organisations still fall short in supporting their long-term career development. Without fair and transparent promotion systems, organisations risk reinforcing existing power dynamics and limiting the leadership pipeline. Promotion processes are therefore not only a tool for rewarding performance but a mechanism for building equity, accountability, and lasting organizational change.

A core barrier in this stage is the persistent **glass ceiling**; a set of invisible structural and cultural obstacles that limit women's access to senior roles, regardless of their performance. Despite equal or higher levels of competence, women remain underrepresented in decision-making positions due to biased promotion systems and unequal access to growth opportunities. One of the most influential factors for that, is performance bias, the tendency to overestimate men's potential and underestimate women's, even when performance indicators are similar. Research from Yale University shows that women are often rated higher in actual results but lower in perceived leadership potential. Since promotion decisions often prioritize potential over past performance, this bias creates a significant barrier to advancement (Shue, 2021).



Another common obstacle is the **motherhood penalty**, where women with caregiving responsibilities are viewed as less committed, ambitious, or reliable. This perception persists even in the absence of evidence, leading to fewer opportunities for growth and leadership. Rather than recognizing the skills that parenting often cultivates, such as emotional intelligence, time management, and strategic thinking, organisations may disqualify mothers from demanding roles based on outdated assumptions.

Even when women are promoted, many experience the **empowerment gap**, being granted new responsibilities without the corresponding power, authority, or visibility. Such symbolic promotions fail to translate into meaningful influence or career advancement. In these cases, promotions become symbolic rather than transformative, especially when roles lack clarity or support. This is often seen in so-called “diversity promotions,” where inclusion is performative rather than structural. When decision-making power does not accompany a new title, the individual remains excluded from key influence and impact, reinforcing rather than dismantling inequality. To overcome this, organisations must ensure that promotions come with clearly defined roles, access to key projects, and inclusion in strategic conversations. This means providing formal support structures such as sponsorship programs, leadership coaching, and networks that amplify the voices of newly promoted women. By doing so, companies not only affirm the value of their leaders but also foster genuine empowerment that drives sustained impact and retention.



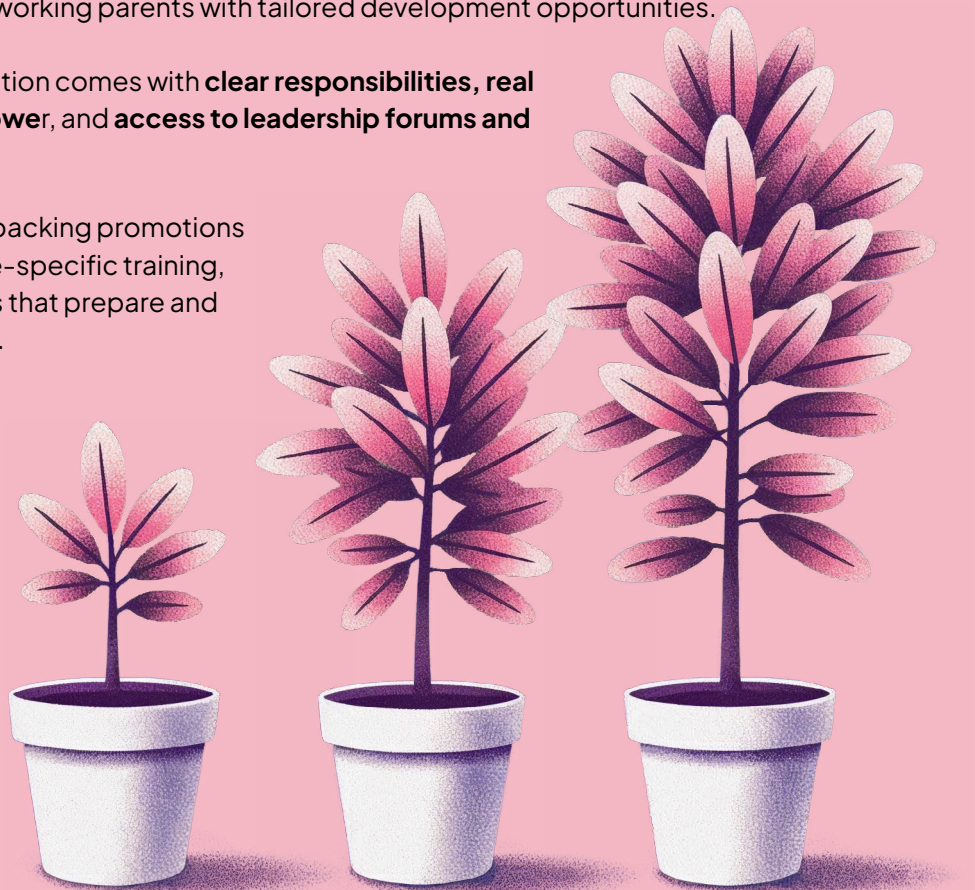
To address the barriers that women face in career advancement, organisations must implement a **comprehensive and transparent promotion strategy** grounded in equity, data, and accountability. The first step is to establish clear and consistent promotion criteria across all roles and departments. These should include well-defined job levels, competency expectations, and evidence-based standards for evaluating both performance and potential. Without such clarity, subjective judgments often prevail, perpetuating biases that disproportionately impact women.

Summary checklist

Inclusive promotions

To build a leadership pipeline where women are not only retained but actively advanced, it is crucial to embed equity, transparency, and accountability throughout the promotion process. The following practical actions focus on removing barriers, fostering genuine inclusion, and ensuring that promotions lead to real empowerment and career growth.

- ☐ I create and apply **standardized promotion criteria** across all departments, clearly defining performance and potential expectations at each level.
- ☐ I regularly **review promotion data** to identify gaps between performance ratings and perceived potential, and take corrective action to reduce gender bias.
- ☐ I **recognize caregiving** as leadership experience and ensure it is valued in promotion decisions; I support working parents with tailored development opportunities.
- ☐ I ensure every promotion comes with **clear responsibilities, real decision-making power, and access to leadership forums and resources**.
- ☐ I **avoid tokenism** by backing promotions with mentorship, role-specific training, and integration plans that prepare and support new leaders.



Get the full toolkit

This guide provides a foundation for understanding the stages of the hiring lifecycle and the biases that can influence them. The full Inclusive Hiring Toolkit offers a deeper exploration, including:

- **Detailed strategies and explanations** for each stage of the hiring lifecycle.
- **Evaluation tools** to assess organisational processes and uncover biases at each stage.
- **Case studies and research references** to enrich understanding and inform practice.

Additional resources include:

- **Tailored trainings and workshops** to strengthen inclusive hiring capabilities.
- **Consultations** to design, refine, and implement inclusivity policies that drive systemic change.

Get the full toolkit to advance toward a truly inclusive hiring process!

Get the toolkit

Full
version with
additional
resources



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