Overcome Hiring Manager Resistance to Nontraditional Candidates

by Jack Fuller

Recruiting leaders recognize the value of tapping into nontraditional candidate pools, but hiring managers and business leaders are often resistant to hiring these candidates. Recruiting leaders must act now to change these mindsets and reshape the hiring landscape.

Ask a recruiter what they are thinking when deciding which candidates not to present to a hiring manager. If the answer has anything to do with how the hiring manager might initially react to the résumé instead of how the candidate is not the best person for the role, you have a problem.

In an honest attempt to hire the best candidates, hiring managers typically have a narrow target in mind, and recruiters know it.[1] If it's an early career hire, the candidate's education, internships and GPA carry a lot of weight. For midlevel and senior-level hires, prior experience in their role, function or industry, as well as role-specific hard skills, are top of mind.

Any candidate who deviates too far from the narrowly prescribed profile (usually modeled on a pattern of previous hires) is unlikely to get

an interview at all.[2] These candidates are called "nontraditional" candidates, and they are likely to be discounted, overlooked or excluded from the hiring process (see Figure 1).
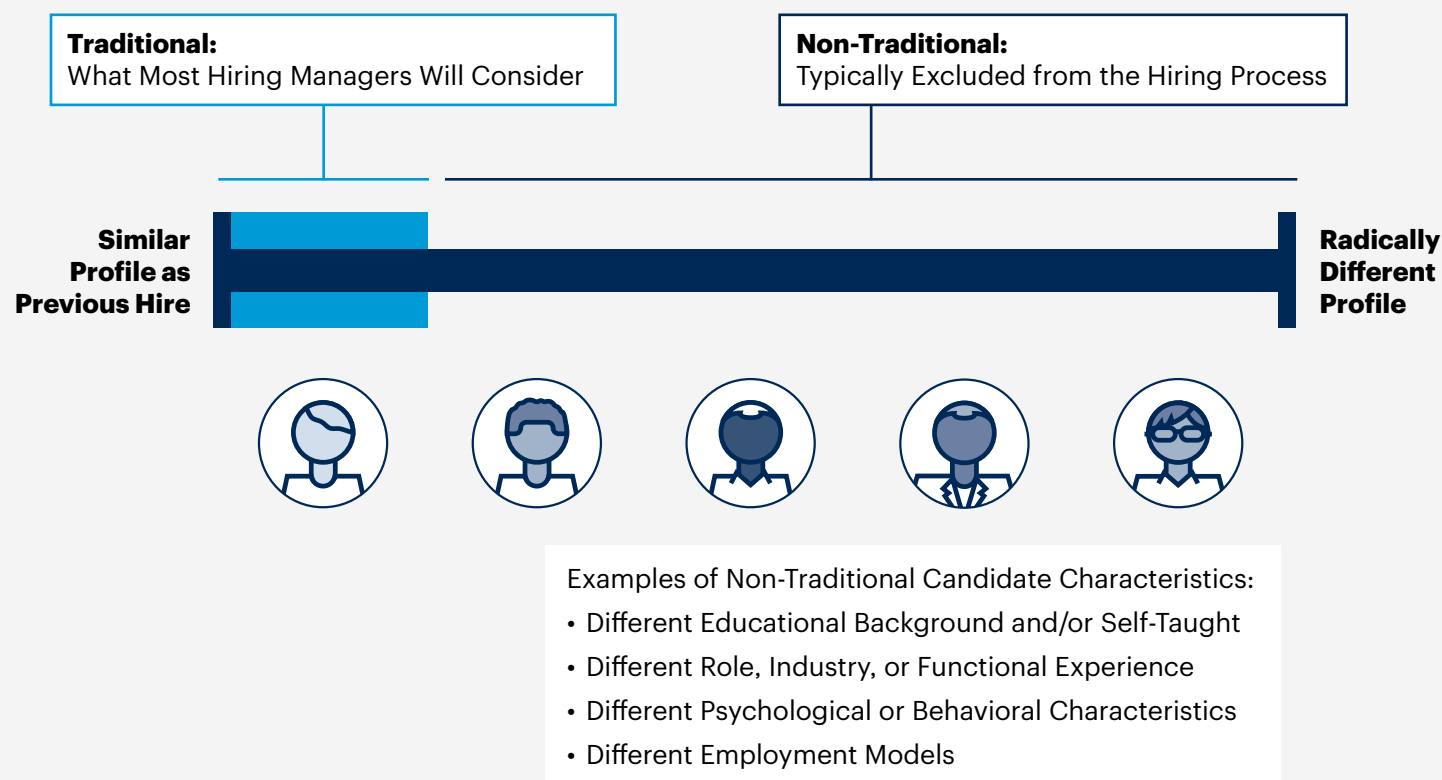
Nontraditional candidates are individuals with qualifications, skills or experiences that differ from those typically sought to fill a given role. Nontraditional talent sources are often discounted, overlooked or excluded from the hiring process. Examples include individuals from different functions, roles, industries, educational backgrounds or employment models, or with different psychological or behavioral characteristics.

Why It Matters

Most team managers, business executives and HR leaders theoretically recognize the value of tapping into nontraditional candidate pools. They bring diverse experiences and perspectives. Considering them in sourcing opens up wider talent pool options and removes traditional barriers to access, such as cost of education or access to networks. They can even be more cost-effective (e.g., outsourced or contingent labor).

Most importantly, teams and organizations cannot thrive as homogeneous groups: They need individuals who approach problems in different ways and have different experiences. In practice, however, hiring manager resistance to nontraditional candidates during the hiring

Figure 1. Traditional vs Nontraditional Candidate Spectrum
Illustrative

Traditional: What Most Hiring Managers Will Consider

Non-Traditional: Typically Excluded from the Hiring Process

Similar Profile as Previous Hire

Radically Different Profile

Examples of Non-Traditional Candidate Characteristics:
- Different Educational Background and/or Self-Taught
- Different Role, Industry, or Functional Experience
- Different Psychological or Behavioral Characteristics
- Different Employment Models

Source: Gartner

process — and recruiters' corresponding hesitancy to propose them — can be a huge problem for modern organizations as they confront a rapidly changing business context. If left uninterrupted, the problem will only worsen as habits become more deeply ingrained.

Recruiting's mandate is narrow: It is not to hire a radically different candidate at the other end of the talent spectrum. Rather, it is to start the cycle in motion with small deviations from the traditional candidate profile, one hire at a time.
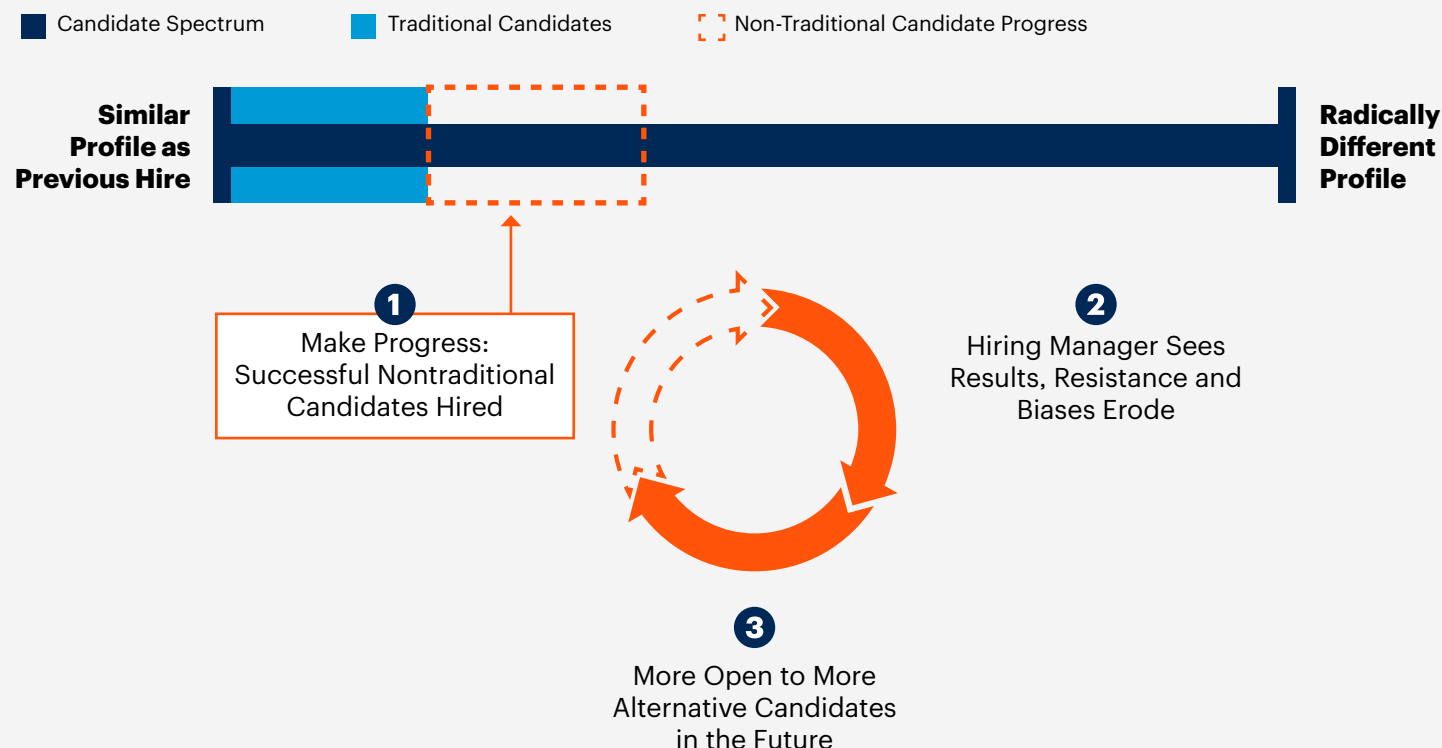
Recruiting's Mandate

Given that 81% of organizations give line managers ownership of candidate selection, the central question for recruiting is ambitious: How do you convince hiring managers to go against their instincts?[3]

In the long term, the answer is to change their instincts and assumptions, which is easier said than done. The way to achieve this begins with hiring just a few nontraditional candidates, ensuring they are successful, allowing the hiring manager and other leaders to come to their own conclusions about the quality of the hire and then capitalizing on their increased openness to hire even more nontraditional candidates. In a perfect world, the cycle reinforces itself.

In the short term, recruiting leaders must focus on the initial push to confront assumptions about nontraditional talent (see Figure 2). If this is not successful, the long-term goal of overcoming hiring managers' resistance will fail.

Figure 2. Recruiting's Current Mandate

■ Candidate Spectrum   ■ Traditional Candidates   ⬚ Non-Traditional Candidate Progress

Similar Profile as Previous Hire — Radically Different Profile

1. Make Progress: Successful Nontraditional Candidates Hired
2. Hiring Manager Sees Results, Resistance and Biases Erode
3. More Open to More Alternative Candidates in the Future

Source: Gartner

Five Steps to Influence Hiring Managers

Step 1: Set Expectations With Your Recruiting Team

The first step is to make the goal attainable and the task manageable. Recruiting leaders should communicate to their staff that hiring nontraditional talent is a priority, but they should also clarify what is not expected. Recruiters need to know they are only expected to make incremental progress initially (and why) and that not every hiring manager needs to be influenced right away.

Recruiters must also understand that progress has many different avenues and that a candidate can be considered nontraditional in many

different ways (see Figure 3). It could mean a candidate has a slightly different educational background, or it could mean the candidate has served in adjacent roles or functions. So long as one element of the candidate's profile deviates from what a hiring manager would traditionally ask for, they have the potential to start breaking down assumptions.

Step 2: Target Engagement With Hiring Managers Most Likely to Change

Naturally, some hiring managers will be more open to taking a chance on nontraditional candidates than others. With hiring managers who haven't explicitly expressed willingness to consider these candidates, recruiters and recruiting leaders can use three criteria to identify those most likely to be agents of change.

Figure 3. Multiple Avenues for Progress
Non-Traditional Talent Spectrum Examples
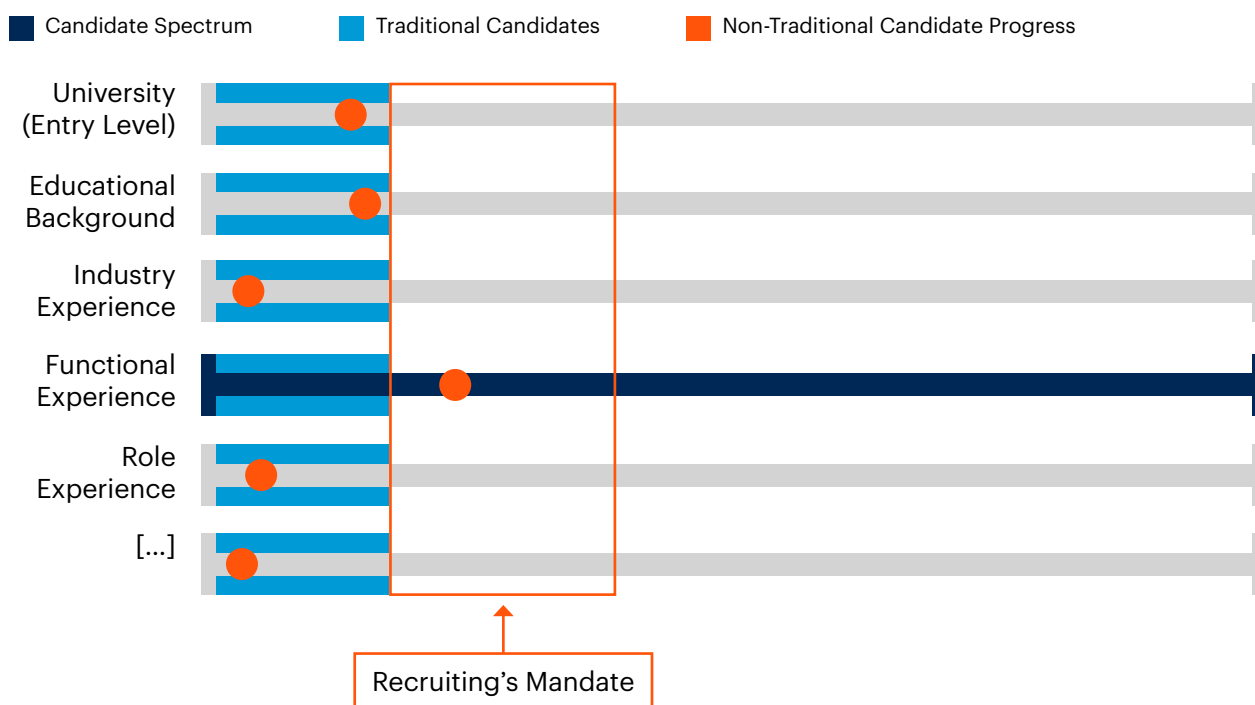
Source: Gartner

Note: Left End of the Spectrum Denotes,"Same Profile as Previous Hire" While the Right End Denotes,"Radically Different Profile"

- **Work Dynamics —** Identify hiring managers who are filling roles in areas that are rapidly evolving or transforming (e.g., IT, customer service), ideally where the skills requirements are ambiguous. Not only are these areas primed to benefit the most from the nontraditional perspectives, but hiring managers also may not be able to rely on patterns of previous hires because the roles did not previously exist or existed in a very different form.

- **Hiring Requirements —** Look for managers hiring either entry-level talent or for high-volume roles. Because entry-level hires are not as critical to the business's performance and are theoretically the most malleable from a development perspective, hiring managers may be less averse to staffing teams with one or two nontraditional candidates. Hiring managers aligned to high-volume roles have more room for compromise (e.g., three traditional hires and one nontraditional hire).

- **Development Experience —** Early nontraditional candidates must succeed in the organization or at least demonstrate potential. If they do not, biases against nontraditional talent will worsen. For this reason, target hiring managers (or corresponding team managers) with strong track records of developing talent.

Step 3: Engage Hiring Managers Before Vacancies Occur

When a manager loses a member of their team, they may naturally default into "replacement mode," seeking to quickly hire a candidate with the same skills as the previous team member.

Our data indicates, however, that hiring managers are much more likely to buy in to hiring nontraditional candidates in the future as opposed to when they are trying to backfill a vacancy. When asked about the next open position on their team, 76% of hiring managers said they would be willing to hire internal employees who needed to be upskilled to qualify, 61% would be willing to redesign the role and 61% would be willing to hire employees on temporary rotation from another organization.[4]

Recruiting leaders and recruiters alike have an opportunity to capitalize on this openness by engaging hiring managers about plans for future vacancies, rather than trying to convince them to take a chance when the team is missing a key member.

In these conversations, recruiters can bring information about the estimated supply of talent and time to fill and then prompt hiring managers to describe how the role is evolving and which skill requirements are flexible or inflexible.

Step 4: Involve Diverse Inputs to Define Hiring Needs

Once vacancies do occur, informed hiring requires more than just hiring manager input. Many hiring managers today are unfamiliar with the roles they are hiring for: 68% of hiring managers say they have low or medium familiarity with the role they are hiring for, and 72% have never worked in that role.[5] This does not mean they are not a valuable source of information during the needs definition phase, but their instincts for backfilling are more likely to be shaped by the status quo than by experience. Unsurprisingly, the target candidate profile for

many roles today reflects the characteristics of those who have filled the roles in the past.

Recruiting must leverage 360-degree needs definition when defining hiring needs, seeking perspectives below, above and at the same level as the target hire. First, target the leadership team, prompting them to define common traits for success and articulate their view for the team's evolution in the next two to five years. Next, seek the opinions of the associates who will likely be peers of the new hire, prompting them to define the skill sets most needed from a peer and to describe the ideal next hire on the team. Finally, if possible, engage the more junior associates the new hire might manage or mentor, prompting them to articulate how the best managers/mentors have helped them in the evolution of their role.

Step 5: Create Exposure to Nontraditional Talent Outside of Specific Hiring Decisions

Hiring manager bias against nontraditional talent is not caused by malice. More often than not, they lack exposure to nontraditional candidates. Outside of hiring for specific roles on a hiring manager's team, many opportunities exist to increase hiring manager exposure to these candidates so they can see the potential for themselves before they are ever faced with a hiring decision.

Recruiting events, case competitions, company-sponsored workshops and even interview panels (for candidates on other teams) are all places where hiring managers and business leaders

Figure 4. 360-Degree Needs Definition

- Define **Common Traits for Success** on the Team
- Articulate **Team Evolution** in the Next 2 to 5 Years
- List Most Needed **Future Skill Sets** on Team

1 Leadership Team

2 Peer Associate

- Define **Skill Sets Most Needed From a Peer** for Success of Your Future Projects
- Describe the **Ideal Next Hire** on the Team

3 Junior Associate

- Describe How the Best Managers Have **Prepared You** for the Evolution of Your Role
- Describe **Future Team Success**

Source: Gartner

have a chance to see nontraditional candidates in action. Recruiting leaders must leverage every opportunity possible to involve these would-be hiring managers and build their comfort level with nontraditional talent.

Conclusion: The Time Is Now

At its core, hiring manager resistance to nontraditional talent is rooted in an uncomfortable truth: Everyone is influenced by cognitive biases, even if unconsciously.

To influence hiring manager decisions, recruiting must confront these biases one hire at a time. The key is to start small: If recruiting leaders begin to push the issue now, a hiring manager's ideal candidate for a role in several years might be considered radically nontraditional today. This will not only allow business and team leaders to meet tomorrow's challenges with new perspectives, it will also open up more options for recruiters to source high-quality talent. In today's hypercompetitive labor market, no organization should miss this opportunity.

[1] 2019 Gartner Hiring Manager Panel Survey (n = 3,517 hiring managers) asked respondents the following question about their most recent hire: "If you had to hire this position again, what would you focus on improving?" Seventeen percent said "Hiring someone with a different skill profile" and 11% said "Hiring someone from an alternative work model (e.g., temporary or contingent)." The most common response was "None of the above."

[2] Only 6% of recruiting staff report their last requisition filled was from a nontraditional source. 2020 Gartner Future of the Recruiter Survey (n = 253 recruiting staff).

[3] 2021 Recruiting Executive KPI Benchmarking Survey (n = 36 recruiting executives).

[4] 2019 Gartner Hiring Manager Panel Survey (n = 3,517 hiring managers). Note: Willingness was measured on a five-point scale: Very Unwilling, Somewhat Unwilling, Neutral, Somewhat Willing, Very Willing. Stated results reflect "Very" and "Somewhat" categories.

[5] 2019 Gartner Hiring Manager Panel Survey (n = 3,517 hiring managers)

The organization profiled in this research is provided for illustrative purposes only, and does not constitute an exhaustive list of examples in this field nor an endorsement by Gartner of the organization or its offerings.

Case in Point
Clorox

THE CLOROX COMPANY

Recruiting leaders at Clorox realized recruiting from the same core schools year after year meant new hires were likely to have similar education, experiences, backgrounds and perspectives. Rather than sourcing from specific schools, Clorox hosts case competitions at its regional offices, inviting students from schools in the surrounding region. Additionally, recruiters at Clorox deliberately invite students from additional schools throughout the country to ensure a good mix of perspectives and backgrounds.

The case competition allows hiring stakeholders to assess and observe students' interpersonal skills and abilities while they work in groups, and Clorox brings in hiring managers and business leaders to serve as mentors and judges. This allows them to see quality through candidates' work and behaviors, not their university affiliations or line items on their resume.