Focus Group Report

How can Information and Communication Technology be used to reduce bias in the workplace?

INTEgreat Project

12 March 2024

Introduction

Social Hackers Academy (SHA) orchestrated a pivotal focus group session on March 12, 2024, as a cornerstone initiative within the collaborative framework of the INTEgreat project. This joint venture, involving partners from Greece, Italy, Spain, Cyprus, and Ireland, is ambitiously designed to enhance the integration strategies tailored for refugees and asylum seekers across Europe. Each partner's unique contributions, from Greece's innovative approaches to Italy's comprehensive programs, are integral to fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for migrants. The aim is to mitigate prejudice and bias while fostering improved quality of life for individuals within the participating countries.

Within the multifaceted landscape of the INTEgreat project, SHA has organized various pilot activities, notably soft skill courses and full-stack web development programs. It has also organized networking events and facilitated focused discussions through roundtables and focus groups. These endeavours serve as incubators for constructive dialogue, fostering collaboration between migrants, refugees, and stakeholders to co-create solutions that amplify social and economic empowerment.

One such initiative within this pilot project was the convening of a strategic focus group by SHA, meticulously tailored to explore the transformative potential of information and communication technology (ICT) in combatting prejudice and bias. This forum provided a fertile ground for dialogue and exchnage, aiming to harness the power of ICT as a catalytic force in equipping refugees and migrants with the tools and opportunities needed to create brighter futures and access meaningful employment opportunities.

The profile of the participants

The focus group convened a diverse cohort of ten individuals, serving as a microcosm of the collaborative spirit that underpins the INTEgreat project. Facilitated by two representatives from SHA, the dialogue was enriched by including nine dynamic participants from various corners of the IT industry. The diversity of backgrounds set this assembly apart, with participants representing diverse migrant experiences garnered from their professional experiences across Greece and other European Union countries.

As the discussions unfolded, meaningful experiences emerged, such as challenges, opportunities and barriers faced in pursuing meaningful employment. Participants shared their personal stories with us, offering poignant insights into the challenges encountered while navigating the pathways of job acquisition and retention within diverse sectors.

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Biases and prejudice faced in the workplace

Throughout the engaging discourse, participants courageously shared workplace encounters, shedding light on the inequalities encountered by refugees and immigrants within the European landscape. The next paragraphs summarize the findings of the meetings and the conclusions that the participants came to agree on.

- Gender Inequalities: All participants agreed with tales of exclusion and marginalization, with many female migrants and refugees recounting firsthand experiences of being sidelined from coveted positions across diverse sectors solely on account of their gender. Their testimonies underscored the enduring legacy of gender-based discrimination.

- EU and non-EU Applicants: Visa sponsorship was discussed as another difficulty faced by many when pursuing a career as non EU citizens. Participants talked about the financial burdens and bureaucratic hurdles encountered, particularly for non-EU applicants, whose aspirations were often stymied by the prohibitive costs and logistical intricacies of obtaining legal documentation. This systemic barrier underscored the urgent need for streamlined immigration policies fostering inclusivity and equitable employment opportunities.

- Racial Discrimination: A palpable undercurrent of racial prejudice permeated the discourse, with participants sharing poignant accounts of facing discrimination predicated on their linguistic proficiency. Participants mentioned having faced biases due to their level of knowledge of a foreign language when trying to build a career.

- Appearance-based Discrimination: The haunting spectre of appearance-based discrimination cast a shadow over the narratives shared as participants recounted instances of being subjected to bias and prejudice based on their physical attributes.

What practices should companies put in place to reduce prejudice and bias?

At this part of the discussion, participants were asked what practices companies could implement to help the recruitment process and reduce biases both in the hiring process and during their working time in companies. Two main points were highlighted in this discussion:

- Expand Internship and Part-time Opportunities: By amplifying the availability of internships and part-time positions, organizations can serve as incubators for new talent, providing invaluable hands-on experience to junior profiles eager to immerse themselves in the professional arena. These opportunities not only afford junior professionals the chance to expand their skills and acclimate to the rigours of the industry but also serve as a springboard for navigating the complexities of the field. Embracing a culture of mentorship and experiential learning, organizations can cultivate a pipeline of skilled professionals primed to make meaningful contributions to the workforce.

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- Revise Experience Requirements for Junior Profiles: A barrier faced by junior profiles lies in the stringent experience prerequisites often demanded by employers. The imposition of arbitrary experience thresholds, such as stipulating a minimum of two years of prior experience, disproportionately excludes individuals fresh out of academia and eager to embark on their professional journey. Embracing a more inclusive hiring paradigm, employers can unlock untapped reservoirs of talent, fostering a diverse and dynamic workforce reflective of the evolving needs of the industry.

How can ICT Technology be used to reduce bias and prejudice?

For the last part of the focus group, we focused on concrete steps that can be taken to use ICT technology to reduce bias and prejudice.

The Application Tracking System (ATS) has reshaped the recruitment landscape, altering the dynamics between employers and job seekers. Through insightful discussions with participants, a prevailing narrative emerged: numerous individuals found themselves on the sidelines of the hiring process, their applications seemingly lost in the digital labyrinth governed by ATS algorithms. Addressing this systemic challenge necessitates a paradigm shift towards inclusivity. By dismantling barriers rooted in gender, nationality, and religion within the selection process, organizations can transcend biases and prejudices.

Furthermore, enhancing support mechanisms tailored to individuals with disabilities or neurodivergent traits emerges as a pivotal imperative. Embracing technology streamlines hiring procedures and pioneers innovative solutions to optimize working conditions for this demographic. In doing so, workplaces can cultivate environments that celebrate diversity and empower individuals to thrive professionally.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the narratives shared by migrants and refugees shed light on the pervasive biases and prejudices that continue to block their access to meaningful employment opportunities. From gender inequalities to visa sponsorship hurdles and appearance-based discrimination, these barriers underscore the systemic challenges faced by individuals navigating the complex landscape of the job market.

However, within these challenges lies a beacon of hope: the transformative potential of information and communication technology (ICT) in mitigating biases and fostering inclusivity. Through the strategic deployment of ICT tools such as inclusive application tracking systems and virtual interviewing platforms, organizations can dismantle barriers rooted in gender, nationality, and language proficiency. By embracing technology-driven solutions, employers can transcend traditional hiring paradigms, create environments that celebrate diversity and empower individuals to thrive professionally.

Furthermore, companies can implement proactive measures to reduce biases within their recruitment processes, such as expanding internship and part-time opportunities to cultivate diverse talent pipelines and revising experience requirements for junior profiles to assess candidates based on their potential and aptitude rather than arbitrary thresholds.

Our hope is that this report and the practical feedback received by participants will help reduce biases and prejudices and allow migrants and refugees to enter the working field and succeed in their careers.