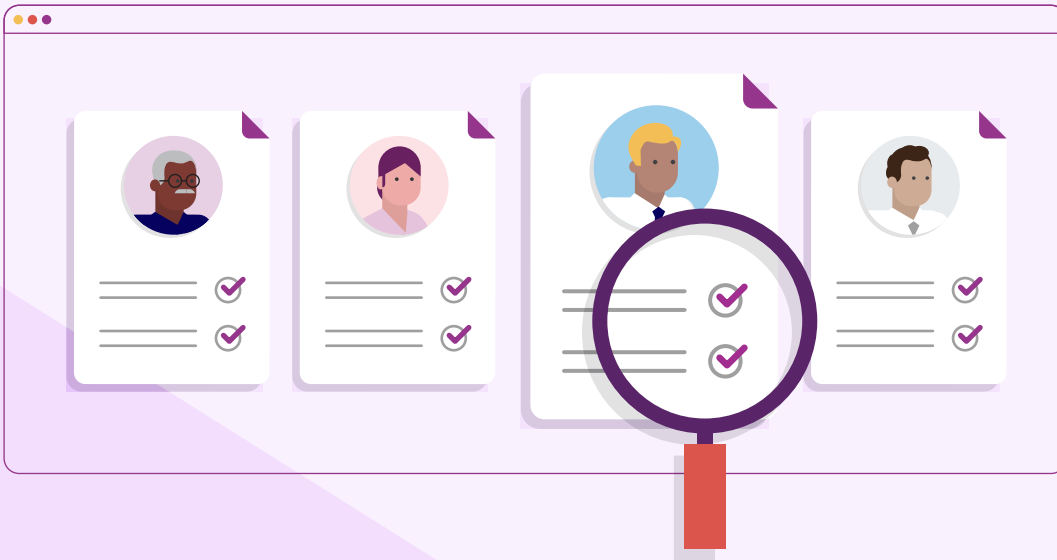




Favouritism in recruitment

Guidance material – integrity scenario

This guidance material presents an ‘integrity scenario’ which is intended to assist in public sector training regarding integrity risks, highlighting the risks of favouritism and conflicts of interest in local government recruitment processes. It demonstrates how personal relationships and organisational culture can undermine fair and merit-based hiring practices. The scenario emphasises the importance of transparent recruitment procedures, clear conflict of interest policies, and robust oversight mechanisms in maintaining public trust and organisational integrity.

The situation

A talent manager in the human resources function of a local government council in regional Victoria was responsible for overseeing recruitment processes across various departments. With 15 years of experience in their role, the talent manager was well-respected and trusted by colleagues and superiors.

The council had recently approved the creation of a new position: community engagement officer. This role was crucial for improving communication between the council and local residents, especially considering upcoming infrastructure projects that were likely to impact the community.

How did the misconduct start?

As the talent manager began preparing the job advertisement and selection criteria, they received a call from an influential and well-known member of the community, who had professional ties to senior people involved in the local council. The community member informed the talent manager that they had received a tip-off that a role that their nephew may be suited for would shortly become available. The community member mentioned their nephew, a recent communications graduate, was seeking a local government position.

Initially, the talent manager politely acknowledged the information but did not think much of it. However, after the job was advertised, the community member made additional calls, subtly pressuring the talent manager, emphasising the nephew's qualifications and suggesting that having someone with 'local connections' would be beneficial for the role.

The talent manager felt uncomfortable but did not want to upset the community member, given their known ties to senior people in their organisation. They justified to themselves that there was no harm in ensuring the nephew was aware of the opportunity, reasoning that they would still need to go through the proper application process.

How did it escalate?

As applications came in, the talent manager noticed that the community member's nephew's resume was indeed impressive, but there were other equally qualified candidates. The community member continued to enquire about the progress of the recruitment, implying that they would be disappointed and would be 'letting their close friend in council' know if the application was not progressed further.

Feeling the pressure, including feeling concerned for their job security, the talent manager made adjustments to the interview questions associated with the selection criteria, emphasising local knowledge and community connections – aligning with the nephew's strengths. They also selected panel members likely to favour local candidates.

During the interview process, the talent manager subtly guided discussions towards topics that highlighted the nephew's strengths. The talent manager rationalised these actions as necessary for selecting a candidate suited to the local context. The selection panel, influenced by the talent manager's guidance and the tailored criteria, ultimately recommended the community member's nephew for the position. Despite mixed feelings, the talent manager finalised the appointment.

Meanwhile, a staff member from the interview panel reported concerns about bias in the hiring process, leading to a confidential review by the governance team.

The review confirmed wrongdoing and exposed systemic issues, including undue community influence linked to senior leaders in the council. The talent manager received a formal warning and the hiring process for the community engagement officer position was cancelled, and the council's hiring process was redesigned with stricter oversight. The council introduced reforms, such as regular recruitment audits, external oversight for senior roles and training for leaders on maintaining professional boundaries and protecting council integrity.





Lessons learned

- Implement clear, written policies on managing conflicts of interest in recruitment, including specific guidelines for handling applications from individuals connected to staff.
- Establish a multi-layered approval process for recruitment decisions, especially for positions that may be subject to political influence.
- Require that all shortlisting and interview panel decisions be documented with clear justifications for each candidate's assessment, ensuring accountability.
- Regularly rotate staff involved in recruitment panels to minimise the risk of personal biases influencing decisions.
- Conduct blind recruitment practices where feasible, in which personally identifiable information is removed from applications to reduce unconscious bias.
- Schedule regular third-party reviews of the recruitment policies and practices to ensure they are up to date and align with best practices.

This product was prepared based on findings from research and stakeholder consultations from IBAC's 2024 Public Sector Strategic Assessment. It is representative and created for educational purposes only. Any resemblance to real persons, organisations, or incidents is purely coincidental.

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