

Meghan M. Biro: Bias in hiring, three words. This is a problem that a lot of smart people are working on right now. We are living in a really exciting time when leaders have really seen the light about building more diverse teams, and we're seeing a steady stream of tech to help us eliminate our bias and truly value diversity. Stay tuned as we go deep on AI and bias.

Meghan M. Biro: [00:00:30] Welcome to the Work Trends podcast from Talent Culture. I'm your host, Meghan M. Biro. Every week, we interview interesting people who are re-imagining work. Join us on Twitter every Wednesday, 1:30 p.m. Eastern, using the hashtag WorkTrends.

Meghan M. Biro: Today's episode is supported by HR Tech Connect. HR Tech Connect Summit is an exclusive chance to connect with other HR [00:01:00] leaders and learn how tech investments can improve every part of the employee journey. This is from recruitment to productivity to wellness, and I've got a bonus for you. I'm going to be there in Florida. Find out more about how you can attend as a fully hosted guest. Inquire at HRTechConnectSummit.com.

Meghan M. Biro: There are a million studies that show the benefits of a diverse workforce. More [00:01:30] innovation, faster growth, better performance. I recently read about how Microsoft is finding ways to limit personal bias in their hiring. Here's an idea I really loved. In the past, Microsoft would allow hiring managers to see each other's feedback on a candidate before it was their turn to interview them. Everybody on the interview loop could see what others were saying before interviewing them. Recently, Microsoft made the feedback loop private. A hiring manager can't log in [00:02:00] to the tool and see their colleagues' feedback until they've entered their own assessment of a candidate first. That simple change has allowed people to turn from their own opinions without being influenced by their peers or their bosses. Genius, right? Let's keep looking for ways to reduce bias with today's guest.

Meghan M. Biro: Today's guest is Angela Hood. She is a serial entrepreneur from Austin, [00:02:30] Texas, one of my favorite places in the world. She spent years researching artificial intelligence, and she's joining us today to talk about bias in hiring. Welcome to Work Trends, Angela.

Angela Hood: Thank you so much for inviting me to join, and I love the fact that you love Austin. We love Austin as well.

Meghan M. Biro: Are we keeping it weird?

Angela Hood: We keep it so weird. Our new weirdness is how many scooters we have here.

Meghan M. Biro: Oh, right?

Angela Hood: Yeah.

Meghan M. Biro: I'm little concerned. [00:03:00] I like scooters on one hand. On the other hand, there's a danger factor going on, and we're starting to see more stories about that. You know what I'm saying?

Angela Hood: Oh, yeah. We have this funny thing now that, normally if you're walking downtown Austin, you're looking at the crosswalk, you walk when the green guy pops up and says to go. Now, you look to the left, look to the right, behind you, making sure there's not a scooter that's going to beat you to the crosswalk, because that's generally what's happening. It's not so much that cars are hitting scooters. It's scooters [00:03:30] are hitting pedestrians.

Meghan M. Biro: Wow. Not surprised. I mean, Austin has grown so much since I first visited there, which was, I want to say, about 12 years ago. So much has changed there. Right? The growth, South by Southwest, just the festivals, the people and also technology, right?

Angela Hood: Yes, Downtown, it's really interesting because you see a lot of companies that used to be here, like finance companies, real estate companies, things like that. They're all moving out further north and further south, [00:04:00] and being replaced by tech companies. We are right by Rainey Street, so it's the big happening place in Austin. We have a three-story new building that we're in. When people come over here they're like, "Oh my gosh, you're right by Rainey Street." I'm like, "Well, it's a double-edged sword when you have a team and it's a Friday afternoon."

Meghan M. Biro: "Somebody is calling me and I think it's called a restaurant or a bar."

Angela Hood: Right, exactly.

Meghan M. Biro: We have options.

Angela Hood: Yes. Yeah. [00:04:30] It's a fun place. It's great for recruiting, I have to say that. We were just talking about HR perspectives, that people love that they can walk to work. They park in the morning, they can walk to work, they can walk to restaurants, they can go to bars, they can invite their friends down and meet up with them. It's a great culture aspect, but being downtown with so much traffic, we really have to manage even work hours around this.

Meghan M. Biro: Good for you. I'm so glad you're here with us today. I want to talk [00:05:00] about diversity at work in general, and then we can get into the role that tech plays in all of this. You started out your career as an engineer. What was it like being the only woman in that field?

Angela Hood: Yeah. I think the thing that was interesting for me is, I was quite naive on this topic. I was at Texas A and M University, I was in the construction science department, and there was mostly men. There was a few women. The women that were there, we were very tight. Then, when I graduated I thought, "Okay," I

think [00:05:30] I just didn't think forward to say, "When I arrive on the job site, there's going to just be all men." When I arrived, I didn't even think about it. I was just like, "I'm here for work." I was excited, I was a new graduate. The response from the men was that, they just didn't know what to do with me. It was like, I was weird to them.

Angela Hood: They tried to make me feel better by giving me my own port-a-potty and giving me a pink hard hat, and doing all kinds of things that made it awkward. They didn't do it with malice, [00:06:00] but it made me realize just how different I was, and I thought, "Okay, there's probably a lot of other women that are experiencing the same thing," because the workplace is becoming more diverse. There are women going into spaces that were traditionally male-dominated, and I know what it feels like. I thought, "I would love to be able to build a company that can help address that and make everyone feel more comfortable with it, as we move towards a more diverse culture."

Meghan M. Biro: When we think of bias, we often think about gender and race, [00:06:30] but there's a lot of other ways we're biased. When we're evaluating a job candidate, for example, what are some of the prejudgments we make? Because we're doing this, let's just get honest.

Angela Hood: Yeah. Everyone has bias, that's the important part to start the conversation with. I have it, you have it, we all have it. It's part of our survival mechanism as a human. The next thing is, admit you have bias, have proactive discussions, and then making proactive actions to address [00:07:00] it.

Angela Hood: With this is exactly your point. A lot of people think of gender and ethnicity as bias, that that's where all the bias lives, but there's so many more biases. These come down to, if a person who has been ill, or a family member was ill, and they needed to take off work for a year, or a year and a half, and they needed to help either become healthier or help their family member, when they go back into the workforce, it's seen as a gap in their employment. For most [00:07:30] recruiters, that's a no-go. You're over, you're done, you're not going to be looked at. This person did not lose their skillset or their intelligence. They just had to take care of something that was a priority for them. This happens with parents, when you stay at home, and this is men and women. They just stay at home with their children, trying to start that family relationship off strong, and then they get penalized for it in the workplace.

Angela Hood: Those are just some modest examples. Then you get into disabilities, which oftentimes a person's [00:08:00] perceived disability really means they have a superhero skillset in some other category. If you leverage that, you can do amazing things for your company. The companies really lose out on this. They are missing opportunities with huge talent, because of these very old versions of stereotypes of why you don't want to hire someone or even interview them.

Meghan M. Biro: The whole job gap thing, you're right. That's real. It's still happening, even though if we look at the data, [00:08:30] it's telling us we're all becoming gig workers, but there's still that, like, "What have you been doing for that six to 12 month period?" Myself as a former recruiter, as many of you know, I find myself asking that same question. Then, I find myself 30 seconds later going, "Stop. Don't do that. You don't know the whole story. You need to look at somebody and see somebody's whole picture before you dive into that." Right? How long is this gonna take us, is my point, to actually make that leap and go, "Wait a minute, hold on. [00:09:00] Let's step back. Let's look at this person," as I like to say, "In 3D."

Angela Hood: Yeah, exactly. Well, I think too that, you also forget what is gained by those months or even years that they were not in the workforce. Perspective, maturity. A lot of times when people have gone through that, if it was because of an illness or something related, they have a new perspective on life and what really matters. They bring that kind of level of maturity to the company. If they have [00:09:30] been a stay-at-home parent, a lot of times they have learned how to multitask in ways that no one ever learns how to multitask until you have children. There's just assets that they bring to the table, and I think it's so wrong for us to, number one, judge, as you said, not knowing the whole picture. Number two, not realize that there's an opportunity that's created by this experience that was had during this time.

Angela Hood: The way I handle it personally is, I say, [00:10:00] "I'd like to talk to you about this gap that you have. Share with me whatever you feel comfortable sharing, but I want to understand, what did you learn during that time period?" Sometimes they will be very forthcoming. They'll say whatever, "I was burned out and I really needed a sabbatical," and then other times they tell you stories that you're just like, "Oh my gosh, I had no idea."

Meghan M. Biro: How would you know if you didn't ask a smart question like that? That's a great question, by the way. Love it.

Angela Hood: I think it just makes them realize that you really care, [00:10:30] you are trying to get us to know them better, that it's not just an interview. It's, "Let's find out something about one another."

Meghan M. Biro: Speaking of one another, you've said that candidates also bring bias to their own process. How do they do so? Because I think this is an interesting twist on this.

Angela Hood: We did not know that this existed until we were doing our research, and this is one thing I really like about having science-based research when you're trying to solve a problem, is that you have a hypothesis, but you also have to watch for what the data [00:11:00] is telling you. We kept seeing certain jobs would have huge number of applicants. Certain other jobs, not so many applicants, and they

would be essentially the same job, but there were in just two different companies.

Angela Hood: I'm going to give you a very specific example that really highlights it. There's a company that delivers packages to our door every day. They're very popular, and then, there's also a-

Meghan M. Biro: Wait, hold on. I wonder who that is.

Angela Hood: Yeah. Then, there is a rental car agency [00:11:30] that is one of the biggest rental car agencies in the world. Two massive brands, everyone would know them, and they both had a job opening for GPS engineers, the satellite engineers, because they need to monitor logistically, like, "Where are the cars, where the packages, where the trucks that are carrying packages," so this is really important. They both have roughly the same salary. The one that had the least amount of applicants, the salary was a little bit higher, the benefits were much better. [00:12:00] The transportation constraints around the traffic and everything was much better if you had gone to work for the rental car company, but they only have, like, 20 applicants. Then, the other company had 1800 applicants.

Angela Hood: We started looking at this thing. We said, "Okay, let's figure out why." We went painstakingly and we started calling applicants and said, "Why did you interview for this job? Did you even see this other job? Two things had happened. The first one, the first company [00:12:30] that had the most applicants, they have a very popular brand, it's very popular among people that are of the age category that were coming into this job. They were like, "I know this company will hire me, because I know this company hires people between 28 and 35." The other company ...

Meghan M. Biro: Oh, there you go.

Angela Hood: Right, that's it. It was an age thing. People that were older, people that were engineers, they were 40 or over, were applying [00:13:00] for the rental car company, and they would not apply for the other company. That was one thing that they were ... They were self-selecting based off of ageism that they perceived from the brand. Whether it was valid or not, that's a different question, but that was the perception.

Angela Hood: The second part was how the job description was written. It drew in a certain type of person to apply for one or the other. What was one of the more fascinating things was, all of the women applicants, all [00:13:30] the female applicants, applied to the rental car place. There were no female applicants to the other one, even though we had, I think it was, 1,800 applicants. We were like, "Okay, there is a lot going on here." When we talked to them, we found that there was basically four or five core biases. If you baked all of those down, it became, where they thought that they would be accepted. Where did they

think that there was a matter of inclusion that was going to happen once they were hired, and that's how they picked where they applied.

Angela Hood: [00:14:00] The last really great piece of data was the best engineers applied to the rental car place, not to the other employer.

Meghan M. Biro: Very interesting when you start asking these questions and collecting this data, right?

Angela Hood: Yeah. It's not what we think it is. There's a lot of other things going on.

Meghan M. Biro: I'm hearing a pretty steady debate in HR tech right now about bias, specifically in tech. Some people see AI as a way to eliminate bias, but a lot of others are warning us to be careful, because us humans are biased, [00:14:30] as we talked about, and we're the ones building the technology. What's your POV on those?

Angela Hood: I think the challenge is real, and I think the skepticism is founded, so let me start with that. To build a technology that is not biased is incredibly difficult. My view is, you have to prioritize it. You can't do the matching first and then say, "Okay, let's reduce the bias." You have to say, fundamentally we remove bias at every single point possible, and then we work [00:15:00] with the humans that use our technology to give them a cleaner starting point, so that the first candidates that they are seeing are more diverse, so that there is a better opportunity for them to actually hire a more diverse culture into their company.

Angela Hood: I think the thing that it really comes back to though is, how do you address it? What most artificial intelligence companies do is, they learn from the past. They learn from data from the past, actions from the past. [00:15:30] That creates the bias, because humans have so much bias, and so you're just learning more bias.

Angela Hood: Our approach was very different. We approached it by gathering data from very diverse sources. Our team is incredibly diverse, and there was a sign that was in our development team the entire time that said, "Remove bias, remove bias, remove bias." That was their sole mission, was, even if it takes longer [00:16:00] to get there, it's fine, but we have to have the bias removed. I cared very passionately about it and identified it early, because of my own life experience, but also because, we used a data-led approach to solve the problem.

Meghan M. Biro: Walk us through how HR teams can use AI and other technology to reduce bias in hiring. Give us some studies, some case studies, you name it.

Angela Hood: I think one of the things that was most shocking to me is that, there's been numerous studies done [00:16:30] on this, so this is not me making up the information, that when people look at LinkedIn profiles, they're spending over 60% of the time looking at the picture. There is nothing more biasing than the picture, and [crosstalk 00:16:43].

Meghan M. Biro: Isn't that interesting? Everyone, if you're out there listening to Angela and I right now weigh in on Work Trends, that to me is, I'm surprised. I might think it's 40%, but 60%?

Angela Hood: Yeah. Again, [00:17:00] I think it's subconscious. I don't think that people are generally bad people. I don't think that they're trying to discriminate. Certainly not recruiters, they had training, they're professionals. I think there's way too much negativity discussed about HR teams, and I think there's this assumption that there's just people out there rampantly discriminating. That is absolutely not what's happening.

Meghan M. Biro: That's a really good point, by the way. Thank you for bringing that to light.

Angela Hood: Yeah. One of the other biases I see is [00:17:30] around names. If a name is very difficult to pronounce, so we see this primarily inside the Indian culture in technology. Names are hard for Americans to say. What happens is, people are like, "I don't even know what I'm going to say to the person. I don't know if that's their first name or their last name." There's all these things that happen. It's because of an uncomfortable [inaudible 00:17:54] in the person that's looking at the resume, that that's why they don't reach out to them. That is just wrong, but again, [00:18:00] it's because we don't talk openly about it. Then, it becomes stigmatized and so we don't deal with it. Every time I give a talk, I talk about these things that are uncomfortable. I'm like, "Stop being uncomfortable about it. We all have it. We are all dealing with it."

Angela Hood: I think another one that we were really surprised about was the look of the resume. People would say, "Oh, I love this resume. Oh my gosh, this person structured a beautiful resume. It's very easy to read. This other one over here, this is a train wreck, don't even know what they're talking about." That is true and it's valid.

Meghan M. Biro: It [00:18:30] is valid. I just would like to say, perception is reality right now, especially when you start talking about future talent and how they're perceiving opportunities. This is a whole larger conversation. There's something real about landing, let's say, on a LinkedIn profile, or landing on a website, and it looks like very old school, 10 years ago. I'm biased. I'm the first one to admit it. What do we do about that? Do we just have an open conversation? How do we bridge these gaps?

Angela Hood: [00:19:00] Yeah. My view is, you start with open conversation, is you start with saying, "Is this legitimate?" What we see a lot of in tech, I'll just use this very specific example with engineers, engineers are usually terrible at writing resumes, but that's not what you're hiring them to do. You're not hiring them to write resumes. You're hiring them to do something that's very difficult, typically. Having the mindset that that resume may look terrible, but it doesn't mean that the person does not do exactly what it is that you need for them [00:19:30] to do.

Angela Hood: I think these are the places where technology can help, because technology doesn't care about what it looks like. It just cares about the content. It doesn't care what the name is. It just cares that there is a name so that you can reach out to them. I think what happens is, it allows people to have technology assist them. Like in our instance, we rank and score candidates for jobs, and so they just know, "Okay, these are the people to start with, up at the top, and they're the ones that are going to be best-suited," [00:20:00] and, "Ouch, I don't know if I know how to say that name, but that person's the best ranked, so I'm going to call them."

Angela Hood: What we found is, our customers are like, "Okay, now we're feeling the relief of that initial challenge that we have for removing our own bias." What I cannot do as a technology company though is, I can't do what happens later. Are you going to interview them with a clear mind? Are you going to have an objective viewpoint? That's why I think the content that you're producing and the listeners [00:20:30] that are listening to it, I think that's why this is so important, because you are making them conscious every single day, that they need to be aware that the bias needs to be stripped out over their own processes.

Meghan M. Biro: Okay. You are a smarty pants, right? You spent years researching artificial intelligence. Tell us what's the one thing people get wrong when they're talking about AI.

Angela Hood: Well, I don't know if I'm a smarty pants.

Meghan M. Biro: Sure you are. Come on.

Angela Hood: No, I think [00:21:00] I'm very passionate about it. Anything-

Meghan M. Biro: Good answer.

Angela Hood: You're passionate about something, you dig in. I think the one thing they get wrong is that, artificial intelligence is not robots. It is not coming to take your job. The way we really should discuss it is that, we should call it augmented intelligence. It's augmenting the work of humans and making them better at their job.

Angela Hood: Math and science can be calculated very, very quickly with a computer, [00:21:30] much faster than a human can do. However, to get science or AI to go and get a drink out of the refrigerator is very difficult. It's not well-suited for computer and automation. That's much better for a human, and it's much like that in HR. We are not going to be talking to the candidates, we're not going to onboard them, we're not going to make them feel welcome or included in the organization. None of that is going to happen.

Angela Hood: The only thing really, I think, that automation is good for in HR is this very first part, [00:22:00] and that's where the artificial intelligence part comes in,

because we can calculate things very quickly. I just don't think it's scary, and I think there just needs to be more awareness so that people remove the fear that they're feeling right now.

Meghan M. Biro: All right. I know a lot of people out there want me to ask this, so here I am. What's it like being a female tech founder? I know that, even in 2019, I mostly come across male founders, if I'm really, to your point, doing the math, [00:22:30] looking at the data. What's your take?

Angela Hood: It does present challenges. Again, I was a bit naive about this. I'm also over 50, so if you can imagine that you're not 35 and you're not male, so you're just sort of weird right off the bat. The downside of it is that, I do think that there's people that maybe think that, you won't have the grit required to really make a successful startup launch, that maybe you don't have the stomach for it, because it is very difficult and [00:23:00] there's some really challenging moments.

Angela Hood: The flip side of it though is, at least right now, we get a lot of facetime because people are trying to be proactively more female founder friendly. You do get that initial introduction sometimes that I think maybe men don't get anymore, because there's this leveling that's happening.

Angela Hood: What you make of the meeting though is really where the rubber hits the road. I find that sometimes investors will ask me, "Oh, do you think it would [00:23:30] have been easier to raise your round," or, "Do you think you would have had more money invested had you been a male?" It's funny to me, because the presumption is that we didn't have a successful raise, or that I wasn't able to raise a good round, and that was wrong. It was just like, the preconceived notion was that I was struggling, and I wasn't.

Angela Hood: I think those are the moments where I really realized how baked-in this bias is, but it's really up to us to prove differently. There's no amount of just talking [00:24:00] about it that's going to change that perception. We're just going to have to continue to do well. I think there's some really successful female founders that are ahead of me, as far as their growth. I think they're really setting the stage for investors and companies to go, "You know what? We need to pay more attention to them."

Meghan M. Biro: Just be that person, be the one, and show people the way and will continue to do so. What's your advice for leaders who want to invest in AI for their hiring process? What's a good way to start?

Angela Hood: I think the first thing is to identify [00:24:30] points of pain that their team does not want to discuss. I had a meeting yesterday with someone, and it was a company in D.C., and the recruiter team, the top three recruiters were on the call, and their COO of the company was on call. I knew the answer to the question, but I asked them to help them. I said, "Can you tell me how many

hours a day that you're spending doing this and this?" One of the things was, "Just reading resumes and not calling anyone," [00:25:00] and then, "How much time are you spending actually planning out diversity and inclusion? How are you going to take the next step," because they were going through a transformation in their company.

Angela Hood: The first answer was, "We spend half of our day reading resumes." When they said that, their COO said, "You mean, you spend half of your day, not the entire team." The recruiters said, "No, our team spends half of every day reading the resumes. He just said, "Okay, stop. I don't want to say anything else. How are we going [00:25:30] to solve that?" It had never been identified, no one had ever said it. This is a company that's been around for 12 years, it's not a new startup or anything, they're a defense contractor. At that point, there was an awareness made to a person that had buy-in authority. He was like, "Okay, we are going to move forward," and it was with our technology. She contacted me afterwards and she said, "Thank you for asking me that question in front of him because," she goes, "I've not been able to get them to understand the pain that we [00:26:00] really feel in this department."

Angela Hood: I've been thinking this through. I don't know how to help recruiters say what they need, because I don't think a lot of them have thought through, where is the pain that they're feeling? Is there a relief from it, or did they just have to suffer in silence?

Meghan M. Biro: Profound. As a former recruiter myself, I know I have felt that way. I'm just going speak for myself, I'm not going to speak for all recruiters out there, but I think we're people-pleasers, [00:26:30] in a lot of ways. I think we don't want to ruffle feathers, we want to do our job. I think it's important, if you are recruiting actively right now and you're in a trench, to speak up. Talk about some of these pain points, because the reality is, five, 10 years ago, you really couldn't. There was no real alternative, and now there is. We have the power to reduce time. I think there's part of that that's just carry-over from pre-sexy [00:27:00] tech, basically. We want to please everybody, and we want to make these connections. I think we're going to get there, but I think it's a process.

Angela Hood: All right. This is the way I think about it. HR controls, in most companies, the largest line item on the budget, which is salaries. They are in charge of that. Like, they are the ones that bring those people in. When someone leaves, they have to replace them. They play such a foundational part of that company. I don't understand why they don't get greater [00:27:30] amount of respect from the leadership in the companies. To your point, you can't apply this rule to every company, but that's what I see. I see that they don't get enough respect, and that, maybe that's why it's a little bit slower for them to be able to adopt things to help them.

Angela Hood: I would hope that we get to the point now where HR stands up for themselves and says, "Look, this is what we're in control of in the company, and we need this help."

Meghan M. Biro: I think there's still a perception that HR is admin, to be very transparent with everybody. I [00:28:00] think recruiters sometimes, unfortunately, fall into that category as well. I'm from the school of, HR and recruiting were very separate when I was recruiting. It's like, I was more in the talent recruiting space, and HR was over there. That's not really the case anymore, obviously, for a variety of reasons. From my point of view, I think HR is becoming more strategic with executive management. Recruiters are as well, but we've got a long way to go. I'm glad we're having this conversation, because if we're don't talk about it, [00:28:30] if we're not asking these questions, Angela, we're not fixing it.

Angela Hood: Yeah, great point. You have really great insight on that point. I don't think I had really thought about it exactly how you were saying. It's just inertia.

Meghan M. Biro: It is, it absolutely is. Listen, we've hit crystal ball time here. I want to know how you think HR is going to transform the way we hire before we wrap it up today.

Angela Hood: I'll tell you what I hope it does. I hope it helps bring in true diversity into teams. That's the thing [00:29:00] that I see has made the difference in our own company. I'm so passionate about it because it works. The customer base for companies is becoming more diverse, and we need to have teams that represent our customer bases so we can increase the ROI, and the economy can continue to be successful. To me, it really comes back to this, and the challenge is, first, do you believe that? If you do, then you have to just not have lip service. You have to start taking [00:29:30] active steps. I think there's a number of technologies, not just ours, but there's other technologies in the HR space that are at your disposal, but it does require people to take action, and take a decisive action, and make some change and transform the business.

Meghan M. Biro: Angela Hood, thanks for being here today. I've learned a whole bunch.

Angela Hood: I really appreciate the invitation. I love the insight that you shared with me too. That's the great thing about podcasts, is, I hope that we all continue to learn from each other.

Meghan M. Biro: [00:30:00] Let's get this party started. Join us for Work Trends Twitter chat. We are going to be on Twitter with Angela Hood on Wednesday, August 14th, at 1:30 p.m. Eastern, 10:30 a.m. Pacific. Join us to talk about how to remove bias in the hiring process. If you'd like to get our Twitter chat questions in advance, sign up for our newsletter at TalentCulture.com.

Meghan M. Biro: [00:30:30] Thanks for listening to Work Trends from talent culture. Join us every Wednesday at 1:30 p.m. Eastern for a live Twitter chat with our podcast guest. To learn more about guests featured on today's show, visit the show notes for

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