

Unconscious Bias

Everyone has unconscious bias and everyone is affected by bias.

Bias is a normal human prejudice that we all have, regardless of how fair-minded we consider ourselves to be. It is the associations and automatic assumptions, negative or positive, that everyone makes about other people or groups of people based on cultural stereotypes, rather than careful considerations. Effectively managing bias in the workplace can increase our creativity and performance, and support effective communication and work fulfilment.

Unconscious bias or “hidden bias” is created and reinforced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences. It is often interpreted as the first impression and intuitions we have when interacting with other people. Unconscious bias is deeply ingrained into our thinking and emotions and is outside of our control.

Types of unconscious bias

More than 150 types of cognitive bias have been identified by researchers.¹ Some commonly discussed types of unconscious bias include:

1. **In-group vs Out-group bias:** The tendency for people to give preferential treatment to others they perceive to be members of their own groups.
2. **Confirmation bias:** The tendency to search for, interpret, focus on and remember information in a way that confirms one's preconceptions.
3. **Halo effect:** The tendency for a person's positive or negative traits to "spill over" from one personality area to another in others' perceptions of them (also related to the physical attractiveness stereotype).
4. **Stereotyping:** Expecting a member of a group to have certain characteristics without having actual information about that individual.
5. **Group attribution error:** The belief that the characteristics of an individual group member are reflective of the group as a whole or the tendency to assume that group decision outcomes reflect the preferences of group members, even when information is available that clearly suggests otherwise.
6. **Status-Quo bias:** The tendency to like things to stay relatively the same (also related to loss aversion, endowment effect, and system justification).

Unconscious bias in the workplace

Despite not being part of our conscious awareness, unconscious bias can have a significant influence on our behaviours and decision making in the workplace. Everyone needs to identify and understand their own unconscious bias, to develop a more inclusive workplace with decisions based on evidence and facts, rather than intuitions and hunches.

Despite many years of effort to establish fairness and equity in the workplace with diversity and tolerance as ‘the norm’, there remain many signs of inequity, such as gender pay equity gaps and underrepresentation of Australian Indigenous employees.

¹ List of cognitive biases, Wikipedia, 18 October 2015: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases

Literature review examples of unconscious bias

The UK Equality Challenge Unit has identified many examples of unconscious bias affecting higher education² and impacting on effective and efficient work practices and outcomes:

Steinpreis *et al.* (1999) found that both male and female academic psychologists were more likely to employ a male early career researcher than an equally qualified female early career researcher. This evened out in later career decisions once an academic had more experience on their CV.

Moss-Racusin *et al.* (2012) found that staff in a science faculty rated male applicants for a laboratory manager role as more competent than equally qualified female candidates, and also chose a higher starting salary for male candidates. They also demonstrated that women in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (STEMM) departments are just as likely to discriminate against female candidates as their male counterparts.

Carlsson and Rooth (2007) demonstrated an added discrimination of having foreign qualifications as well as a foreign name in short-listing decisions.

Uhlmann and Cohen (2005) found that when assessing the suitability of male and female candidates for different roles, the research participants were more likely to redefine merit for the role to fit the profile of the candidate of the 'preferred' gender.

Test your own bias:

A consortium of researchers from Harvard University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington have developed an effective tool for people to test their own unconscious bias. The Implicit Association Test (IAT) - <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

Three tips for managing your bias:

1. Slow down your thinking. *eg. What is the basis of my feelings or thoughts?*
2. Ask counterfactual questions. *eg. What are some alternative understandings?*
3. Two options and two outcomes. *eg. Do we have diversity of thought to achieve our results?*

How committees can overcome unconscious bias:

An outward appearance of committee member diversity (for example, gender and cultural balance) is helpful towards managing unconscious bias. However, remember that everyone has unconscious bias and it is a normal human condition. Committee members should actively engage in discussion about alternative understandings and approaches when making decisions.

Responsibilities of the chairperson include reminding other committee or panel members of their obligations and ensuring these considerations are effectively managed. For example, as part of a recruitment selection panel, the chairperson is responsible for communicating information and managing circumstances relating to: confidentiality, conflicts of interest, and unconscious bias.

Further information

Please contact your local HR representative or the staff Diversity Consultant.



² Equality Challenge Unit, Unconscious bias in higher education: literature review, September 2013:
<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/unconscious-bias-in-higher-education/>