

## Unconscious bias in the workplace: everything you need to know

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We may try to be as objective as possible when making important decisions, especially when these relate to work. However, as human beings, we are all subject to unconscious bias (also known as implicit bias) in one way or another, but the more we are aware of this, the more we can mitigate it. In this article, we'll define unconscious bias, explore the types of bias that might be affecting your decisions, and offer suggestions for how to mitigate bias in the workplace.

Influences such as our background, experiences, and environmental conditions can all play a part in shaping our choices, whether we realize it or not (Newberry, 2019). For the most part, this is not a major issue. But we display unconscious bias when we favour or discriminate against people because of these influences without even realizing it.

Unconscious bias can have a big impact on people-related decisions at work, especially when it comes to recruitment, promotion, performance management, and idea generation (Newberry, 2019). When the bias is prevalent, your organization will struggle to hire diverse teams, and efforts to improve workplace inclusion will be of limited success.

As well as the ethical imperative for recognizing and mitigating unconscious bias, there are commercial considerations, too. Research has shown that a diverse workforce, at all levels of an organization, is more effective, with one study finding that businesses with a more ethnically and culturally diverse board of directors are 43% more likely to make above-average profits (CIPHR, 2019).

### WHAT IS UNCONSCIOUS BIAS?

Unconscious bias is when we make judgments or decisions based on our prior experience, our deep-seated thought patterns, assumptions, or interpretations, and we are not aware that we are doing it (Frith, 2020). The irony is that prejudice and discrimination are inevitable by-products of the efficiency of human cognition.

Making decisions about candidates is hard work and depends on being able to judge them entirely on their merits (Frith, 2020). Every one of us tends to believe that we are fairer, and less prejudiced than the average person. Research has shown that this is an effect of a self-serving attribution bias, one of many unconscious biases that we draw on to make fast decisions (The Royal Society, 2016).

Importantly, we have both a positive bias towards our ingroup and a negative bias towards an outgroup. We are familiar with members of our ingroup and feel on firm ground when judging their excellence and trustworthiness. We perceive a pleasant fluency of action when we experience familiarity, and this makes us feel confident and in control of our decisions (Frith, 2020).

With unfamiliar members of other groups, we are on less sure ground. It often seems like taking a high risk to select such a candidate. Actually, in the case of both familiar and unfamiliar candidates, it is very difficult to shut out unconscious preferences and fears. We are often unaware that we redefine merit to justify discrimination (CIPHR, 2019).

## ***How does unconscious bias manifest itself?***

We are born with a predisposition to prefer the sort of people by whom we are surrounded and to learn from them. Then, through development, our attitudes are shaped by cultural values both implicitly and explicitly, through listening to the everyday talk or reading stories. Our unconscious brain is constantly processing and sifting vast amounts of information looking for patterns. When the unconscious brain experiences two things occurring together (e.g. many male senior managers or many female nurses), it begins to expect them to be seen together with the result that other patterns or combinations start to feel less 'normal' and more challenging to process. If left unchecked this can easily lead us into (at best) lazy stereotypes and (at worst) prejudicial or discriminatory behaviours.

## **Types of unconscious bias**

Unconscious bias can manifest itself in many different ways. Here are eight types of bias, and how they might affect decision-making and interactions at work (Newberry, 2019).

- **Affinity bias:** This is when we show a preference for people we are similar to in some way because we find them familiar and easier to relate to. This could be because of shared characteristics – such as class, ethnicity, or geography – or shared interests or hobbies. At work, this could lead us to feel that someone is not talented, or not right for a role, because we don't have the same characteristics or experiences in common
- **Attribution bias:** This refers to how we perceive our actions and those of others. We tend to attribute our successes to our skills, and our failures to factors outside our control. However, we tend to see the successes of others as down to luck and attribute their failures to a lack of ability. This can cause unfairness during recruitment and appraisals, for example
- **Beauty bias:** This type of bias is pretty much self-explanatory, as it is when we base our opinion too heavily on someone's looks. Although we are told not to 'judge a book by its cover', we may unconsciously favour attractive people for a job – although this has no bearing on their ability to carry out the role well
- **Confirmation bias:** This refers to our tendency to look for evidence that backs up our initial opinion of someone while overlooking information that contradicts our view. Although [first impressions matter](#), when it comes to hiring or promotion decisions, it's important to base decisions only on relevant, factual information
- **Conformity bias:** This refers to our tendency to take cues from others to arrive at a decision, rather than exercise our own, independent judgment. Having a diverse team – and encouraging them to voice their views openly – means a broader range of knowledge and experiences are brought to the table, ultimately helping more creative and well-considered ideas to emerge, so people mustn't feel pressured into agreeing with others' views
- **Contrast effect:** We compare and contrast people and things all the time to help us put them in context. But comparing employees against each other – favourably or unfavourably – instead of assessing them on their own merits can result in a loss of objectivity. For example, the last candidate you interview for a role might seem better than all the others you have already interviewed – but if you had interviewed the same candidate first, you might not have reached the same conclusion
- **Gender bias:** Gender bias is one of the most commonly discussed and observed forms of bias in the workplace, and can get employers and managers into trouble for discrimination. Ways that gender bias can manifest itself at work can include, for example, a male candidate being hired for a physically demanding role, or senior women being routinely asked to take minutes in meetings instead of men in more junior roles. Gender bias can even seep into how we write job adverts; certain terminology [has been found](#) to attract applicants of one gender more than another
- **Halo and horns effects:** This describes our tendency to focus on a particularly good aspect of someone and let the 'halo' glow of that one thing affect our opinion of everything else about them. This can result in us overlooking negative aspects about someone and ultimately lead to us choosing the wrong person for a role, or failing to address performance issues or problematic behaviours. Its opposite is the 'horns effect', where we concentrate on a person's failings and overlook their positive

## How can we tackle unconscious bias?

Although it may not be possible to eliminate unconscious bias, the following measures may go some way towards mitigating its effects and help to make our workplace decisions fairer (CIPHR, 2019):

- **Widen your work circle:** Work with a more diverse range of people and get to know them individually. This will help to improve your [cultural competence](#) and lead to a better understanding of others
- **Slow down:** Our brains [can consciously process](#) only around 40 items of information per second, but as many as 11 million things unconsciously. So when we rush our choices our brains rely on shortcuts – biases – to make decision-making easier and quicker. Lessen the risk of these biases affecting your decisions by slowing down and giving yourself more time to arrive at conclusions
- **Try ‘blind recruitment’:** Removing information from a candidate’s application that might influence your hiring decision – such as name, age, location, and school name – can help you make a more objective decision on their suitability for a role based only on relevant skills and experiences. Using a sophisticated [recruitment software solution](#) will make it easy for you to hide such information from hiring managers
- **Write [gender-neutral job adverts](#):** Make use of tech tools such as [Gender Decoder](#) to check if your job adverts contain unintentional gender-specific language that could dissuade men or women from applying. For example, words such as ‘aggressive’, ‘decisive’ and ‘self-confident’ are regarded as masculine-coded, while words such as ‘collaborative’, ‘empathy’, and ‘trust’ are seen as feminine-coded
- **Use [artificial intelligence \(AI\)](#):** While using AI in your hiring [can be problematic](#) because the data used by algorithms to make decisions may reflect the biases of those who programmed it, and the previous human decisions that it uses as its data points, AI has significant potential to help limit the impact of humans’ unconscious biases. Some organizations are already successfully using AI’s [facial recognition](#) abilities to assess how enthusiastic, bored, or honest a job seeker maybe
- **Invest in training:** Regular, ongoing [unconscious bias training](#) can help organizations address issues systemically and effectively. One-off interventions – such as [Starbucks’s well-publicized training day](#) – are likely to be much less effective (Newberry, 2019)
- **Take responsibility for your own biases:** Strive to be more aware of unconscious bias in yourself, for example by taking the [Harvard implicit association test \(IAT\)](#). By changing your behaviour, you’ll hopefully inspire your colleagues to change,

## Unconscious bias: Scientific evidence

A significant body of work now shows there is a direct link between unconscious bias and actual behaviour – both in the face to face situations and in paper-based analysis or assessment (The Royal Society, 2016). We are likely to have unconscious preconceptions about people's competence, interests, and behaviours. It is particularly when under time pressure or other stress that our hidden biases automatically come into play and take over the control of our actions or judgments (The Royal Society, 2016).

Some now classic experiments in the US showed that white interviewers sat farther away from black applicants than from other white applicants, made more speech errors, smiled less genuinely, and ended the interviews 25% sooner. Such actions were subsequently shown to diminish the performance of any interviewee treated that way, whether black or white. Another study examines the theory that women are perceived less favourably when they demonstrate leadership attributes often associated with men.

Of course, it is complicated. Sometimes we think putting someone from an underrepresented group on a panel will solve the problem. However, different unconsciously held stereotypes can interact with each other. It is not always clear to which ingroup we belong, and it is not always easy to predict this for others. As a rule of thumb, our ingroup is the group we'd like to belong to. Understandably, this is often the group that is currently in power. Thus it is not surprising that women can be biased against other women, and people from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups against other people from the same BME groups.

The best way to prevent yourself from succumbing to these unconscious biases is to become aware of them and take action to prevent them when recruiting, hiring, and retaining employees. Doing so will help your team build a more diverse and inclusive workplace.

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