

An introduction to Unconscious Bias

If you think of your brain as being like a computer or a smartphone – then unconscious (or implicit) bias is the brain's equivalent to predictive text.

Our brains are bombarded with 11 million bits of information every moment. However, we can only consciously process 40 bits.

So, to keep us super-efficient, our brain uses short-cuts to maintain processing speed, if you like, by putting things in pre-prepared boxes to try and make sense of them.

For example, our brain will assess people in a split second rapidly categorising the individuals we meet into groups. Those groups are based on stereotypes and prejudices we hold around age, race, gender, physical ability, cultural and social environment, and much more.

When left unchecked, our biases get in the way of us accepting what is less familiar to us. In the workplace, this can harm recruitment decisions, on who gets promoted, and our biases can hamper our diversity and inclusion efforts.

Common types of biases found in the workplace

Affinity bias: an unconscious preference towards those who are like us, and share similar values, culture, gender, race or ethnicity etc. We are more prone to favouring people like us than those who are different from us. For example, employees who look like those already in leadership more often than not are given opportunities to develop their careers.

Confirmation Bias: is the tendency to seek and process information that is consistent with and upholds our existing beliefs or ideas, and dismiss information that challenges our thinking. For example, a Line Manager may ignore an employee's complaint about microaggressions because they do not see the comments as being a problem.

Gender Bias: The tendency to prefer one gender over another. Gender bias can lead to women being paid less than men, and an under-representation of women in leadership roles.

Halo Effect: when we use one trait about a person or thing to make an overall favourable judgment. For example, the staff member who generates the most sales may be given a pass on their less desirable qualities such as poor communication with their colleagues, organisational skills, timekeeping.

Horns Effect: the opposite of Halo Effect. For example, a candidate arrives late to an interview. The Hiring Manager judges them to be unreliable irrespective of the reason given for their lateness or how well they performed during the interview.

How to minimise the impact of your biases

Although we cannot stop our brain from processing information the way it does, we can make structural changes to our working environment that limit the impact of ingrained biases and challenge us to change our thinking.

These structural changes can include having an accurate picture of our workforce by capturing data, setting measurable targets around equality, diversity and inclusion and structuring the way we recruit, and promote talent.

Your Trainer

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Arit holds an MA in Executive Leadership Development and Mentoring. As a Leadership and Career Development Coach and Trainer, she works with women who are looking to change careers or move into senior-level roles. She also delivers bespoke staff training programmes for employers supporting 'accidental' managers, diversity and inclusion and more. Her [YouTube](#) channel provides viewers worldwide with tips on how to build careers they love either through employment, entrepreneurship or a mixture of both.