

Unconscious bias

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1. Introduction

Unconscious bias can be a real challenge and have a real impact on how we deal with diversity. It can negatively impact team effectiveness and efficiency. It can limit the possibilities in the fields of recruitment, task allocation, career development, competency development, innovation and motivation of staff. Unconscious bias concerns everyone and everyone experiences it.

The values of respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law are in the very DNA of all our European Institutions. The motto of the European Union "United in Diversity" underlines these values.

Diversity is more than putting groups of people from different backgrounds together in the same location. It is about building the conditions for all people to be themselves within the larger group. These different backgrounds can be as varied as gender, age, ethnicity, religion, disability and sexual orientation as stated in the Treaties. These differences can also stem from education, class, functions, physical appearance, etc. They can also be more personality related (introverts, extroverts).

If we want the EU and the European Institutions to thrive in the coming years, we need the benefits that a diverse workforce can bring:

- Increased adaptability and flexibility. A team of people with different backgrounds and perspectives can provide a greater variety of solutions to problems.
- Greater innovation. Organisations with a diverse leadership tend to be more creative
- Better place to work. Welcoming candidates regardless of, for example, sexual orientation, disabilities, race, gender, age, or background means you can hire from a larger pool of people, meaning that you are more likely to hire the best people on the job market. Embracing diversity can also improve existing staff members' engagement and loyalty to your organisation.

This eBook invites you to reflect on your personal biases and how they influence your capacity to see, understand, appreciate and value each and every member of your team with and sometimes despite their personal traits.

"Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance." Verna Myers

2. What is unconscious bias?

Bias is a prejudice in favour of or against a thing, a person or a group compared with another usually in a way that is unfair or inappropriate. It is a shortcut the brain takes to help us make sense of the world. Some are conscious or explicit biases, others are unconscious or implicit.

It is a bias that we are unaware of, and which happens outside of our control. It is a bias that happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences.

It is important to note that biases, conscious or unconscious, may exist towards many social groups. Age, gender, gender identity, physical abilities, religion, sexual orientation, weight, way of speaking, accents and many other characteristics can be subject to bias.

Unconscious bias can take the form of

- Assumptions (“women are more caring than men”),
- Preferences (“I like this person because they have the same hobby as me”) or
- Habitual thinking patterns (“this has never worked”).

They come from our personal experience, social upbringing and cultural environment.

Most biases do not come from a place of bad intent. They are deep-seated, unconscious stereotypes that have been formed in our brains through years of different influences we often had no control over.

Most of us do not believe that we have (negative) biases that affect our work. Understanding our unconscious biases and making them come to the surface, we are therefore more able to address their potential impacts.

For further information

Unconscious Bias @ Work — Making the Unconscious Conscious – Google

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=71&v=NW5s_-Nl3JE

Understanding unconscious bias

<https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/publications/2015/unconscious-bias/>

Google: Who, Me? Biased? NY Times: short series of video on implicit bias and race

3. The science behind unconscious bias

Neuroscience

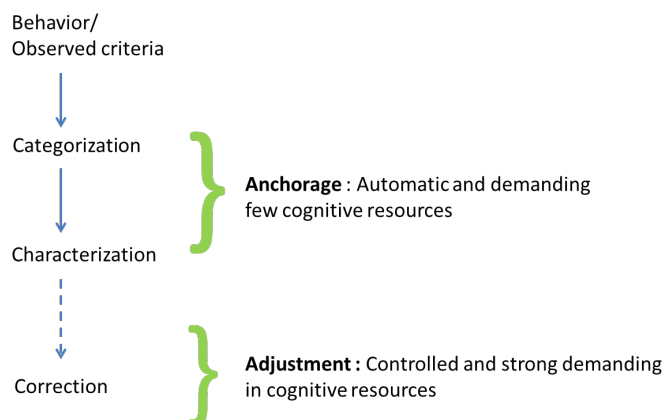
Research suggests that we instinctively categorise people and things using easily observed criteria such as age, weight, accent, look, skin colour, or gender. But we also classify people according to educational level, disability, sexuality, social status, and job title, automatically assigning presumed traits to anyone we subconsciously put in those groups.

The "advantage" of this functioning of the brain is that it saves us time and effort processing information about people, allowing us to spend more of our mental resources on other tasks. The clear "disadvantage" is that it can lead us to make assumptions about people and take action based on those biases. This results in a tendency to rely on stereotypes, even if we do not consciously believe in them.

We receive several million pieces of information every second. We cannot consciously process this information. We only capture 40 to 50 of them at a given time and then only able to process around 7 of them. The others are dealt with subconsciously.

Scientists Fiske and Taylor (1984) say that we are "cognitive misers". By this they mean that we have a tendency to use the processes that are less demanding on our cognitive resources. Making categorisations and characterisations from observed behaviour or criteria (age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, accent, skin colour) is less demanding on these cognitive resources.

Gilbert, Pelham & Krull model (1988) :



IAT Tests – how they work

The *Unconscious or Implicit Association Test* methodology assesses unconscious prejudice by measuring the speed of making associations. For example, the test can measure how quickly someone pairs a face that reflects their own ethnicity with a positive term and then compare that response time to how quickly that person pairs the face of a person of another ethnicity with a positive term.

Neuroscience has now proven that people are not falsely claiming to believe in equality. Instead, neuroimaging shows that decision-making automatically triggers specific regions of the brain responsible for unconscious processing, including those measured by the *Implicit Association Test*. MRI imaging showing which regions of the brain are activated during biased responses, allow us, to see the occurrence of biased associations, increasing our ability to counter or diminish them. Again, the point is that bias is in place whether you are aware of it or not and it can be measured.

Taking these tests allow you to raise your awareness of how ingrained your bias is. It is about realising not blaming.

More information on <https://implicit.harvard.edu/>

When are they more like to be triggered

At the office, our unconscious bias does not always surface or influence our work. But some conditions can affect our capacity to keep it in check.

- When there is **ambiguity**: when there is a lack of information (for instance when we have to make a decision), too much information or when the work or situation we are dealing with is unclear.
- When there is a high level of **stress**: when we have competing tasks to perform, or when we are overworked and tired.
- When we are under **time pressure**: when we must make decisions quickly
- When we are **multi-tasking**: when we are juggling with multiple tasks
- When there is **under-representation** of the group in question: studies have shown that there is a need for at least 30% of women in the Board of a company for instance, for the board to be diverse. When a group is under-represented, stereotypes and prejudices can influence decisions that affect that group.
- When we are under **ego depletion** – when self-control is impaired due to low energy for mental activity
- Other factors e.g. fatigue, drugs, alcohol affect our capacity to control ourselves.

Types of Unconscious Bias

Here are some examples of the most common types of bias.

Conformity Bias

Conformity bias relates to bias caused by group peer pressure. This can happen when an individual feels most of the group are leaning towards/away from a certain position; they will tend to go along with what the group thinks rather than voice their own opinions. For example, you could feel under pressure to recruit a particular person e because all other members of the panel agree. You may be likely not to want to create dissent and therefore feel more comfortable going along with the majority view.

Beauty Bias

There can be a tendency to think that the most good looking individual will be the most successful. This can also play out in terms of other physical attributes a person may have (tall, thin, suntanned...). This happens when certain profiles (young, beautiful women, handsome men) will be selected to welcome people at a conference or when you do not "see" this person as a speaker at a conference, a man as a secretary, a small person as a representative of our unit, etc.

Affinity Bias

Affinity bias occurs when we feel we have a certain connection with someone due to having something in common perhaps e.g. we attended the same university, we grew up in the same city, or they remind us of someone we know and like. This bias can play against people who have no particular hobbies or interests (golf, opera, theatre).

Halo Effect

As the name implies, this bias is caused when we notice one good thing about a person and we let that one significant skill or characteristic affect our overall opinion about that person. i.e. We see a 'halo' around that person. An example could be that we interview someone in a wheelchair and are so impressed by their ability to succeed in one job and therefore are convinced they will succeed in a completely different job – whether there is evidence or not. You could be blinded by this and not pay attention to other competence-related traits.

Horns Effect

The Horns effect is the direct opposite of the Halo effect. The Horns effect is when we see one negative thing about a person and we let it cloud our judgement of their other attributes. This might happen when a person (introvert for instance) needs time to answer questions. This could immediately reduce your interest in the content of their speech.

Similarity Bias

It is natural that we like to surround ourselves with people we feel are like us. We may want to recruit someone similar to us, even if in reality he or she would not be suitable for the job in question. We also tend to prefer to work with people who are similar to us. i.e. Do we tend to have coffee with colleagues from the same nationality or do we work on projects with people we like?. This can also be seen by how people dress in a unit: a tacit dress code emerges.

Attribution Bias

This form of bias affects how we explain our own or other people's behaviour. When we do something well we tend to think it is thanks to our own merit and personality. When we do something badly we tend to believe that our failing is due to external factors such as other people who have adversely affected us and prevented us from doing our best.

When it comes to other people, we may tend to think the opposite. If someone else has done something well we may consider them lucky, and if they have done something badly we tend to think it is due to their personality or bad behaviour.

We might tend to think that a project has failed because “of course, the coordinator is a certain nationality” or a group of women working on a project “it is pure luck that they found time to focus on the project instead of talking about their children”.

Confirmation Bias

When we make a judgement about another person, we subconsciously look for evidence to back up our own opinions of that person. We do this because we want to believe we are right and that we have made the right assessment of a person. When you recruit someone from a particular background (elite university graduate, Asian, Migrant, Greek, German, Roma, African origin, Arab origin) and they are not as efficient as expected, we realise we are not surprised because we did not expect much from them anyway. Or we are surprised because we would have expected them to be more efficient.

For further information

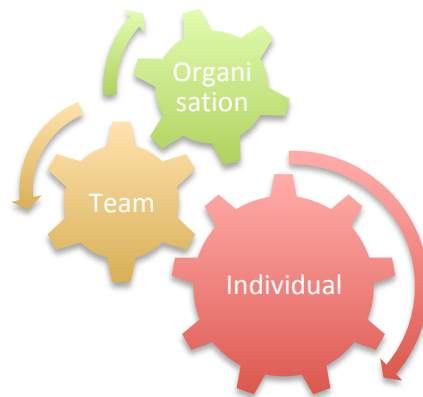
Watch the video *Brain Tricks - This Is How Your Brain Works* @

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JiTz2i4VHFw>

Facebook training on *Unconscious bias*

<https://managingbias.fb.com/>

4. How does unconscious bias affect individuals, teams and the Institutions?



Individual level

Unconscious bias can be expressed through overt derogatory comments or definitive statements or covert innuendos. They can also be perceived through action or non-action (for instance, the career development of someone is adversely affected, or a manager prefers to allocate tasks to a preferred group of people in the team).

Unconscious bias will have an emotional impact on those who are the targets. Some people can clearly identify words or actions, others *feel* a difference of treatment without being able to identify the exact causes. They may feel unable to be fully themselves at work or perceive their contribution to the organisation as undervalued. They may also, on the contrary, feel under stress because they are faced with very high expectations (positive bias), which they feel are too demanding.

This can lead to poor job satisfaction, work tension, frustration, apathy and mistrust, towards managers and colleagues, and more largely towards the organisation. This also sometimes leads to burnout because of the feeling of not living up to expectations.

There is also a risk of self-fulfilling prophecy: the expectations falsely associated with a particular individual due to the existence of a stereotype tend to manifest through the behaviour of this individual. The individual who is aware that he/she is perceived negatively will be anxious and could consequently underperform. The individual who is aware of being perceived positively, on the contrary, will as a rule be more engaged and perform better, but may be subjected to another form of bias in being considered the bosses' "favourite child".

Team/collective level

The impact of unconscious bias on teams comes from how each member of the team feels they are perceived.

When individuals feel undervalued, the team as a whole is not able to function at its full potential. Unconscious bias in a team affects its capacity to tap into its collective intelligence. It limits the capacity of the team to perceive, understand, analyse and deal with situations in a creative manner.

When members of the team are unable to express different opinions and approaches, the team's performance is likely to be limited on both a technical level (capacity to deliver the work) and on a social level (capacity to retain talent and wellbeing).

Organisational level

Unconscious bias throughout the organisation impacts its capacity to best serve the European citizens.

Unconscious bias manifests itself in the limited capacity to integrate diverse opinions and perspectives and a poor capacity to propose solutions that will provide the maximum benefit

The organisation therefore lacks

- Flexibility and adaptability to changing situations or new challenges,
- Difficulty to think and act out of the box to deal with complex problems,

Limited capacity to value talent (recruitment and retention) that could best contribute to its mission.

How does bias affect our actions?

Our Perception	How we see people and perceive reality.	Do I see my colleagues as I would like them to be? Do I pay attention to how different they are rather than how similar they are to me?
Our Attitude	How we react towards certain people.	Do I treat everyone the same way? Do I talk to women the same way I talk to men?
Our Behaviours	How receptive/friendly we are towards certain people.	Do I prefer a coffee with particular colleagues? (same language, those who have children)?
Our Attention	Which aspects of a person we pay most attention to?	Do I over-emphasise the importance of my colleagues' personal life (having children for instance) in their contribution to the team? Do I consider my disabled colleague a "survivor", or particular "strong"?
Our Listening Skills	How much we actively listen to what certain people say.	Do I shut my ears when my lesbian and gay colleagues talk about their "partners"?
Our Micro-affirmations	How much or how little we comfort certain people in certain situations.	Do I support some colleagues more than others and encourage them while I am tougher on others?

For further information

Watch the Video TV2 Denmark about diversity

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD8tjhVO1Tc>

5. Acting against unconscious bias

What areas are affected

Unconscious biases affect individuals, teams and organisations. As a manager, it is important to identify how and in what areas these biases affect our capacity to act fairly and with equity.



Dealing with and mitigating unconscious bias as a manager

Here are some recommendations to help raise awareness of and limit the impact of unconscious bias in your team.

Focusing on yourself

- Move outside your comfort zone and make a point of meeting people with whom you feel uncomfortable i.e. Arrange to meet someone you find difficult to work with for lunch.
- You might want to review your thinking processes: think twice when making a decision. Pause, reflect and consult with others to ensure a variety of viewpoints.
- Try and think out of the box: how can I challenge the way I allocate tasks or make decisions? Are there approaches that I have not tested yet?
- Accept that you have biases: identify your reflective and automatic preferences. Are there things you take for granted?
- Reflect on how you could build in safety nets to protect yourself from being affected by any possible bias: are there possibilities to challenge your decisions or choices?

Focusing on your team

To address the capacity for your team to work bias-free, you can

- Stimulate different views and encourage dissent: create space where ideas or decisions can be challenged.
- Encourage opinions from introverts as well as extroverts.
- Use problem solving and idea generating processes to encourage different views - i.e. OPERA (OPERA (Own, Pair, Explain, Rank, and Arrange) or the De Bono 6 hats method.

Structural recommendations

- Appoint a diversity advocate in your team whose role would be to support reflection and action to mitigate bias in the team
- Recruit someone very different from you or from the general profiles in your team (e.g. introvert or extrovert ; with or without children; younger or older.)
- Introduce a mentoring system to provide you with different perspectives and a soundboard to reflect on any bias and how it hinders the potential of your team.
- Attend specific training courses i.e. recruitment and selection training, that address the question of bias.
- Allocate diversity targets in your teams.

For further information

How NOT to have a job interview with a person with disabilities

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BoVPlqegTKM>

6. Case studies

In this last section, we present several cases of expressed bias or preferences in the European institutions. Each case is then analysed by

1. Challenging the definitions of key preferences
2. Then by identifying the possible consequences of your actions when acting upon your bias.

“This is logical”

The situation

Many managers take decision based on *logic*: recruiting this profile is logical, not recruiting a woman in her thirties or a young mother for a position where she has to travel is logical, not recruiting an assistant with a PhD degree is logical.

The possible problems or risks

- Our logic is obvious to ourselves, but not necessarily to others. You might be putting a priority on a particular aspect of the job at hand (availability, time of reaction) rather than on other elements that the person could bring (motivation, experience, efficiency).
- As logic is obvious (to you), you might not find it useful (or not be able) to explicit it. You could then treat people with condescendence or think they just “don’t get it”.

The possible underlying bias

- [Confirmation bias](#)
- [Conservatism](#) (belief revision)
- [Illusion of control](#)
- [Projection bias](#)
- [Ingroup bias](#)

Challenge your definition

- Challenge your definition of logic: does it mean **better**? If so, for whom? For me? For the person? For the team? For the projects? Or does it mean **easier**? More **convenient**?
- Would this logic remain valid through time: logical today, and tomorrow and forever?
- Is it aligned with the values of the Institution?
- Is it possible to create conditions in your team for these profiles to fit?

Challenge your actions when interviewing “non-logical” profiles

Our Perception	If you see things through (your) logic, you might not be aware of other ways to make decisions or to look at the reality around you.
Our Attitude	Do you look down on people? Do you make decisions (too) fast because logic is your main guide?
Our Behaviours	Do you expect people to fit in a particular box and therefore not take the time to listen to other ways of thinking or working?
Our Attention	Do you pay attention to external factors (age, gender) less than intrinsic factors such as motivation and expertise?
Our Listening Skills	When recruiting, are you not paying attention only to what you are expecting from the candidate rather than be open to a unique individual?

"I only recruit introvert translators."

The situation

When recruiting translators, some managers might assume that a translator should ideally be an introvert (i.e. quiet, not overtly ambitious, focused on their tasks).

The possible problems or risks

- In the current situation of the European institutions, translators are increasingly invited to participate in projects as their jobs are evolving (use of technology, terminology).
- Are you recruiting for your "comfort" or your team or more largely for the Institution?

The possible underlying bias

- [Confirmation bias](#)
- [Ingroup bias](#)

Challenge your definition

- Are you taking into consideration the job today as well as its evolution over time?
- Am I recruiting for myself (peace of mind) or recruiting the best translator?
- Are you overlooking the potential that extraverts can bring to your team?
- Are you prone to putting your colleagues into boxes and therefore expecting them to behave in a particular way?

Challenge your actions toward the extraverts during the recruitment process

Our Perception	Are you aware of the current and future needs of your department and the related profiles?
Our Behaviours	Are you allocating tasks based on your expectations of how people should behave instead of what they can contribute?
Our Listening Skills	Are you paying attention to the intrinsic motivation for the job?
Our Micro-affirmations	Are you giving the same level of eye contact and support to extraverts?

“I prefer to work with high performers”

The situation

Many managers would spontaneously say that they prefer to work with high performers and would therefore allocate the most challenging, interesting and rewarding projects to them.

The possible problems or risks

- You could be spending more time informally with the high performers giving them more advice than to the other colleagues without realising?
- Your high performer could leave the team leaving you with people you have not taken care of as much.
- Performance can evolve over time, because of internal factors (personal situation, exhaustion, etc.) or external factors (complexity of the mission, stakeholders, deadlines, etc.).
- You could be putting colleagues in boxes and asking them to behave as you expect.

The possible underlying bias

- [Halo effect](#)
- [Confirmation bias](#)
- [Self-fulfilling prophecy](#).

Challenge your definition

- How can you build a high performing team and not only individual high performers?
- What is performance in your job context? How is it measured? Is it the same throughout the institution?
- Do you have a too narrow definition of performance: the definition of high performance can be very contextual (number of pages translated, number of invoices processed, quality of a policy proposal, timely delivery, creativity)?
- Are there other elements of performance you are overlooking: contribution to the team, socialising, team spirit, individual and team growth?

Challenge your actions toward the “low performers” when allocating tasks and supporting them

Our Perception	Are you seeing performance as a permanent competence and not a contextual concept?
Our Attitude	Are you not putting people in boxes and creating all the conditions for them to remain in the boxes?
Our Behaviours	Are you giving the same amount of informal support (during breaks, hidden advice, direction) to the low and high performers?
Our Attention	Do you overlook mistakes or misunderstandings from the high performers and not from the low performers?
Our Listening Skills	Are you more impatient with low performers without noticing?
Our Micro-affirmations	How do you support low performers despite their shortcomings?

“Positive discrimination is unfair”

Many managers (men and women alike) are uncomfortable with the target of 40% women in management positions by 2020 or rather its consequence: as they understand it, a woman will be favoured over a man for a management position. They consider this situation as (positive) discrimination and feel its unfair and demotivating.

A woman might consider that she will not be legitimate at her new position because she could be perceived as selected to fill a *quota*, not because of her competences. A man in competition with a woman for the same position might think that he has no chance and be discouraged, disappointed and resentful.

Reviewing some definitions

“Positive action” refers to strategies designed to counteract the effects of past discrimination and to ensure equal opportunities. These include outreach programmes, targets (not quotas), changes in the organisational culture, altering merit criteria, etc. It can also include measures that apply preferences in decision-making. Positive discrimination is one form of positive actions and is rarely used.

However it is not the case that as part of positive actions, senior management should not promote a less qualified candidate in the name of the measure. That would constitute discrimination and is not condoned in EU law nor should be the practice of employers.

This policy is often misunderstood: the objective remains to recruit the most competent managers. The principle is to favour women over a man with equal competences in order to redress the structural imbalance of women managers.

It is often considered as unfair because it is against a particular vision of meritocracy. However it is our current understanding of meritocracy that is inherently flawed. The persistence of inequality (racial, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) challenges whether we live in a true meritocracy. It is important to strengthen the current meritocracy system by correcting current injustices and structural discrimination. This is what this policy aims at.

Other interesting bias

Self-fulfilling prophecy: you give the most interesting projects that motivate the colleague, and therefore they dedicate themselves to this project: they excel

Conservatism (belief revision): The tendency to revise one's belief insufficiently when presented with new evidence

Illusion of control: The tendency to overestimate one's degree of influence over other external events

Projection bias: The tendency to overestimate how much our future selves share one's current preferences, thoughts and values, thus leading to sub-optimal choices

In-group bias is a pattern of favoring members of one's in-group over out-group members. This can be expressed in evaluation of others, in allocation of resources, and in many other ways

Authority bias is the tendency to attribute greater accuracy to the opinion of an authority figure (unrelated to its content) and be more influenced by that opinion.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bias>