

# Understanding Unconscious Bias

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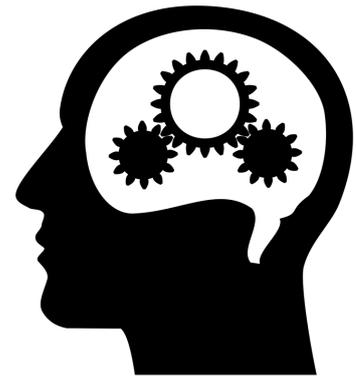
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# WHAT IS UNCONSCIOUS BIAS?

Unconscious bias affects every recruitment process. With more understanding of our innate prejudices, how are we able to implement strategies to mitigate its influence on hiring decisions?

## Definition

Unconscious biases are prejudices we have but are unaware of. They are mental shortcuts based on social norms and stereotypes. Biases can be based on skin colour, gender, age, height, weight, marital and parental status, "foreign" accents or even where someone went to school / university.



## Unconscious bias is great!

The human brain receives 11,000,000 messages per second but the average human brain can process only 40.

We need our brains to make assumptions for us, to speed up how quickly we process information and perceive people. If it were not for unconscious bias we would be in a constant state of confusion and inaction.

## Unconscious bias is innate to all human beings...

People are hardwired to like what they see in the mirror and so often prefer those who look and sound similar to them. Neurologically, these preferences are unconscious and bypass rational thinking. This process all happens in the part of the brain called the **Amygdala**. The purpose of the Amygdala is to process emotional responses to stimuli. This part of the brain is designed for speed and survival, and due to the speed and efficiency of this part of the brain, bias often delivers results of which the person is unaware.

# THREE TYPES OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

1

## Affinity Bias:



The tendency to warm to people like ourselves. It is human nature to seek and like familiarity. This is a danger when interviewing as it's inconsistent with achieving diversity.

2

## Halo Effect:



The tendency to think that a person is good because of their character. "Cheerleader" employees that are enthusiastic and positive are often viewed more favourably than their business outcomes and delivery deserve.

3

## Perception Bias:



The tendency to form stereotypes and assumptions about certain groups that make it impossible to make an objective judgement. This bias is often supported by "confirmation bias" which is the tendency for people to seek information that confirms pre-existing beliefs or assumptions.

We often ignore opinions that don't confirm what we already think and feel, and instead focus on views that reinforce our opinions.

# RECRUITERS AND UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

## Briefing and Advertising

When discussing the hiring brief, Unconscious Bias can affect how we may think about requirements for a role from a Hiring Manager or HR perspective. Below are common areas where we find Unconscious Bias:

- **Job Description** - Is this an accurate and relevant job description, does it use language that is inclusive and are the requirements realistic and accurate?
- **Like-for-like replacements** - Just because a certain type of person was successful for the last hire does not mean the next must be similar. The same principal goes for failed hires.
- **Cultural assumptions** - Do not assume all people who worked for Company X will be the same, most organisations reflect society and are melting pots. If one hire from a certain company didn't work out, don't let this stop you from hiring another candidate from that firm.
- **Title Bias** - AVP, SVP, Director, VP - they all mean different things at different firms and may not accurately portray skill or seniority.
- **Advertising** - Use gender neutral language that does not exclude, e.g. the word "dominate" has been proven to dissuade women from applying to a job.
- **Role Parameters** - Could certain stated work conditions be discriminatory, e.g. an inflexible working schedule (working hours) or requirement for significant interstate / international travel?

No matter the subject, always keep an open and enquiring mind and if you detect bias, do question it.

# RECRUITERS AND UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

As talent professionals we are exposed to the risks of Unconscious Bias throughout the hiring process. It is beneficial to be aware of these so that you can ensure that you, and others around you, mitigate how much effect they have.

## First Impressions

**Resumé** - Our Unconscious Biases kick in from the moment we review a resumé. Details such as the candidate's name, address, education or even the style of the resumé's font and formatting are all subject to bias... and that's all before a resumé has a photo on it!

Assumptions can be made about a candidate from a firm they have worked with previously e.g. coming from "Firm A" means they don't value team work culture or coming from "Firm B" means they are a fantastic sales person.

**Social media/online presence** - Recruitment is often an online experience whether that is SEEK, LinkedIn or other websites/job boards. The online candidate digital footprint can portray a candidate in a light that may not match their professional image, but this shouldn't be a basis for Unconscious Bias.

**Face to face interview** - Unconscious assumptions can be made from a candidate's look, weight, height, accent, the way they dress, shake hands or even smell.



# HOW TO MITIGATE UNCONSCIOUS BIAS RISK WITH INTERNAL RECRUITMENT

If your leaders are unaware of unconscious bias and its effects then they will be unable to address it. Firstly, make sure leaders and decision makers understand unconscious bias is and its implications for your hiring strategy.

Given two thirds of Australian business have committed to improving their Gender Diversity among leadership, it is a highly competitive market for "female talent". The first and simplest step to take is addressing any unconscious bias that your existing staff exhibit.

Be very aware that with internal promotions, the Halo Effect, Affinity Bias, and Perception bias are factors that are equally as influential as they are in external recruitment.

Internal jobs are often informally socialised which may lead to the exclusion of those who are not present at certain social occasions, most notably at lunchtime or after work drinks. Ensure equal opportunity for job socialisation is given to all by ensuring communications are company wide or informal socialisation opportunities are frequent and not restricted to "after hours".

Performance reviews are critical to successful internal recruitment. Setting clear career development goals and giving equal access to training and professional development opportunities is the first step to ensuring consistent and fair processes around talent development, promotion and succession planning. These should be based on business results such as productivity, engagement, and innovation in order to avoid favouritism and bias.

Parental leave and career continuation - have open discussions with your teams and particularly those who are expecting or have recently become parents. Do not make assumptions about their plans (for more information on this please request our recent Parental Leave white paper).

# HOW TO MITIGATE UNCONSCIOUS BIAS RISK IN EXTERNAL RECRUITMENT

- Setting job criteria and requirements - are all of the requirements "must haves" or are they based on previous success and making assumptions?
- Ensure that competencies and selection criteria are clear and documented.
- When reviewing resumes - try removing candidate names and assess the outcome.
- Interviewing - make an effort to ensure the candidate feels relaxed by finding commonalities.
- Make evidence based decisions - too often, good and rigorous hiring practices are removed from the actual decision-making process. The phrase "culture fit" is often used to make a decision rather than "skill fit" which can often be an Affinity bias.
- Socialise job opportunities and remember to actively promote roles within your organisation and beyond. Be acutely aware that male and female employees respond and think differently (which is the whole point of diversity).
- Pay particular attention to encouraging your female employees to actively use their networks - see "The Bias of Referrals" for more on this.



# ADJUSTING THE **EXTERNAL** PROCESSES TO COUNTER UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

## Be purposeful and aware when advertising:

Men seek reasons to apply to job advertisements and women look for reasons not to. Men typically feel comfortable applying for a job when meeting 30% of the stated requirements, whereas women are comfortable at 90%.

Don't rely on advertising to get a response from female candidates, printed and electronic advertising promotes an impersonal and linear recruitment process and female candidates are more responsive to a personal approach.

Review the job description and focus on the must-have skills remembering that the longer the advertisement is, the more it will put off your female applicants.

Modify language to appeal to women. Women on balance respond positively to language relating to team, collaborative environments and training, whilst men are more responsive to facts and figures.

Understand that you may need to be more proactive in the search for candidates. Women are more likely to respond to opportunities for career advancement when actively encouraged to do so, whereas men are more likely to "put their hands up" uninvited.

Please contact us for more information in regards to writing advertisements that appeal to women.



To find out more go to [www.brookerconsulting.com.au](http://www.brookerconsulting.com.au)  
or contact us on +61 3 9602 1666 or [career@brookerconsulting.com.au](mailto:career@brookerconsulting.com.au)

# ADJUSTING THE INTERVIEW PROCESSES TO COUNTER UNCONSCIOUS BIAS



## Interviewing:

When interviewing, women on average will spend two hours preparing whilst men spend less than 30 minutes. Despite this, female anxiety measured significantly higher at interview than the less well prepared male counterparts.

The difference in the [Anterior Cortex](#) part of the brain may influence this as women worry more than men about how they are perceived by others.

Conversely, men are more likely to exaggerate their experience and capabilities and typically have less fear when over-stretching, again this is a function of a larger [Amygdala](#).

Women will seek to nominate out - evidence sourced from a recent study in conjunction with three leading Australian Financial Services businesses showed that time and again women would volunteer their perceived deficiencies during the interview process.

Being aware that women will be more anxious should allow the interviewer to take additional steps to make the candidate feel relaxed. Knowing women will nominate out, try to overcome their objections during the interview process.

By having the awareness that women will underplay their skills and experience and men will exaggerate, then it should help you make fairer judgements on candidates' true skill and appropriateness for roles.

# THE BIAS OF REFERRALS

## Why are men 2X as likely to refer men for jobs?

### Opportunity

- Opportunity - many referrals are social and informal (for example in the pub after work, at the 'footy' etc)
- Men have had more opportunity to socialise jobs to their network because they professionally socialised and therefore were able to spread the word to their networks
- 90% of Primary Carers are female meaning women don't get the same social opportunities
- Men know men, women know women. If you already have an imbalance, referrals can reinforce this

### Trust and attachment

Men feel less attachment to referrals than women - men are happier to pass on information about a job or a potential candidate as they do not have a strong feeling of ownership or attachment to the outcome.

Women think more about consequences and outcomes:

- If the candidate was not right, it would make them look bad
- If the job was not right, it would make them look bad
- If either party did not hear back it would make them look bad

These could be attributed to the difference in the [Anterior Cortex](#).

The good news is... when women do refer people to opportunities they are 3.6X more likely to apply for the job than if they saw the exact same job advertised on SEEK.

# CONCLUSION: HOW TO MITIGATE BIAS?

In summary it is essential to be aware and understand the impact of Unconscious Bias.

**Create structure** - as unconscious bias is our brain's shortcut, we need to create structures to slow the brain down and re-route it to an unbiased, logical path. Putting rigour around the decision making process for hiring and promotion will overcome most unconscious bias and could include:

- **Adjusting** interviews to allow for more structured questioning, both behavioural and technical, remembering conventional interviews encourage unconscious bias.
- **Applying** a matrix decision making process that forces hiring managers to apply reason and logic to hiring decisions and not go on a "gut feel" or perceived "culture fit".
- **Strategically** identifying high performers to help them actively manage their career.
- **Increasing** leaders' comfort with people in their "out group", encouraging formal and informal socialisation of teams across the business.

“We don’t have unconscious biases because we’re bad people – we have them because we are people.”

Bias is not inherently wrong; it is human nature and the lens through which we see the world.

Support projects that encourage positive images of stereotype-busting images. Many studies show that the mere positive image of specific groups of people can combat our hidden bias.



