

9 Types of Unconscious Bias and the Shocking Ways They Affect Your Recruiting Efforts

<https://www.socialtalent.com/blog/recruitment/9-types-of-unconscious-bias>

Posted by Siofra Pratt, 3rd November 2016

How many decisions have you made today? 5? 10? 15? Chances are you won't be able to put an exact figure on it. That's because we make countless decisions every day without even realising it. Even as you sit here reading this you're making decisions. Decisions about me, the content, the questions I'm asking you. And the answers to all of these questions are influenced heavily by something **researchers refer to as "unconscious bias."**

What is "unconscious bias"?

"Ok, so what is unconscious bias and why is it influencing my decisions so much?", I hear you ask. Well, simply put, bias is an inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group. In other words, unconscious bias are unconscious feelings we have towards other people – unconscious feelings that play a strong part in influencing our judgement of certain people and groups, away from being balanced or even-handed, in many different areas of life.

One of the most prominent areas of life where bias can play out is the workplace. In fact, one of the strongest biases we have in the workplace is gender bias. Why? Well, our feelings about gender and the stereotypes we've all associated with gender are something we've developed throughout our whole lives. How we've been brought up, where we've been brought up, how we've been socialised, our socialisation experiences, our exposure to other social identities and social groups, who our friends are/were, as well as media influences, all affect how we think and feel about certain types of people – and especially about what makes a man a man and what makes a woman a woman.

It's important to mention however, that most bias stereotypes, do not come from a place of bad intent. It's just a deep seated, unconscious stereotype that's been formed in our brains through years of different influences we often had no control over. For example, just think about of all the phrases you've heard associated with women in the workplace over the years, like "The Glass Ceiling", "The Maternal Wall" and the "Gender Pay Gap".

How does bias affect our actions?

"Most of us believe that we are ethical and unbiased. We imagine we're good decision makers, able to objectively size up a job candidate or a venture deal and reach a fair and rational conclusion that's in our, and our organisation's, best interests," **writes Harvard University researcher Mahzarin Banaji** in the Harvard Business Review. *"But more than two decades of research confirms that, in reality, most of us fall woefully short of our inflated self-perception."*

Yes, in reality our biases affects us and our decision-making processes in a number of different ways:

- **Our Perception** – how we see people and perceive reality.
- **Our Attitude** – how we react towards certain people.
- **Our Behaviours** – how receptive/friendly we are towards certain people.
- **Our Attention** – which aspects of a person we pay most attention to.
- **Our Listening Skills** – how much we actively listen to what certain people say.
- **Our Micro-affirmations** – how much or how little we comfort certain people in certain situations.

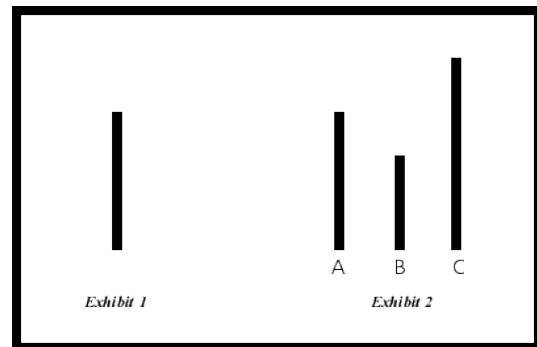
Whether we are aware of it or not, each and every one of these things will affect who we select to come in for an interview, how we interview them, who we hire and our reasons for hiring them. So, how do you stop yourself from falling prey to the dangers of unconscious bias? The first step is simple – make the unconscious, conscious. By acknowledging the different types of unconscious bias we can start to address them.

Types of Bias and How They're Affect Your Recruiting Process

In recruitment, the following types of bias are all very common:

1. Conformity Bias

Based on a famous study that's been around for decades, conformity bias relates to bias caused by group peer pressure. In the study, a group of people is asked to look at the picture on the left and say which line in Exhibit 2 matches the line in Exhibit 1. One individual is told to say what they think. The rest of the group is told to give the wrong answer.



We can see that line A of Exhibit 2 matches the line in Exhibit 1, but when the individual who doesn't know this is a test gives the correct answer only to be informed that the rest of the group has said Line B, the individual decides to scrap their own opinion in favour of the groups' opinion. A phenomenon that occurs in 75% of cases. Just think how this may play out in a panel talking about a candidate. If an individual feels the majority of the group are leaning towards/away from a certain candidate, they will tend to go along with the group thinks rather than voice their own opinions.

2. Beauty Bias

This is the view that we tend to think that the most handsome individual will be the most successful. But this can also play out in terms of other physical attributes a person may have.

For example, while 60% of CEOs in the US are over 6 foot, only 15% of the total population is over 6 foot tall. And while 36% of US CEOs are over 6.2 feet, only 4% of the US population is over 6.2 feet tall. So again, this shows some bias in terms of how we perceive a CEO should look like.



In recruitment, it's common that recruiters will look to fill a role with someone who shares similar physical attributes to the person who held that role before, or who they believe looks like the kind of person who should have the role based on their preconceived bias.

3. Affinity Bias

This plays out a lot in terms of recruitment! Affinity bias occurs when we see someone we feel we have an affinity with e.g. we attended the same college, we grew up in the same town, or they remind us of someone we know and like.

For example, when we interview someone we feel we have some affinity with, our micro-affirmations play out a bit more



than they usually would with someone we felt we didn't share an affinity with. For instance, if they tell us they're a little nervous we may smile at them more, offer more words of encouragement etc. Whereas, if a person we shared no affinity with told us the same thing, we wouldn't be quite as warm towards them as we had been to the candidate we felt we shared a connection with. After the interview, you'd then speak in much higher terms of the first candidate and how much you feel they'd "fit in" over and above the second candidate.

4. Halo Effect

Halo is when we see one great thing about a person and we let the halo glow of that significant thing affect our opinions of everything else about that person. We are in awe of them due to one thing.



For example, when looking through someone's CV/resume we may see they went to a particularly highly regarded college where they received a certain high grade, or they had undertaken some very sought after work experience program. Upon seeing that, we tend to see everything else about that person surrounded by the glow of that achievement.

5. Horns Effect

The Horns effect is the direct opposite of the Halo effect. The Horns effect is when we see one bad thing about a person and we let it cloud our opinions of their other attributes.

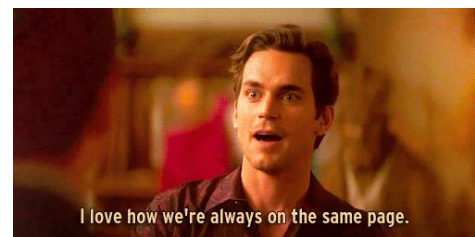


For example, when interviewing someone we might be put off by the fact that they speak very slowly because our unconscious bias has caused us to assume that someone who speaks slowly is unintelligent. If we assume they're unintelligent, everything they say or do for the rest of the interview will be clouded by our judgement.

6. Similarity Bias

Naturally, we want to surround ourselves with people we feel are similar to us. And as a result, we tend to want to work more with people who are like us.

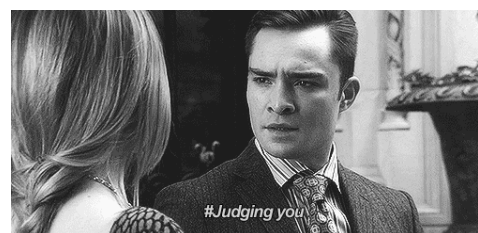
In terms of recruitment that may mean that we are more open to hiring individuals we see parts of ourselves in.



7. Contrast Effect

This plays out regularly in recruitment, particularly amongst recruiters who spend large amounts of time sifting through CV after CV or conducting interview after interview.

For example, if we're looking at a number of CVs/interviews in a row, one after the other, we tend to compare each CV/interview to the one that came before it. We judge whether or not the person in front of us did as well as the person that came before them. When really, the only thing we should be comparing are the skills and attributes



each individual has, to the skills and attributes required for the job, not those of the person that came directly before them.

8. Attribution Bias

This is the most common form of bias in the recruitment process as it affects how we assess other people. When we do something well we tend to think it's down to our own merit and personality. When we do something badly we tend to believe that our failing is down to external factors like other people that adversely affected us and prevented us from doing our best.



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

9. Confirmation Bias

This is one that recruiters have to be extremely careful about! 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're right and that we've made the right assessment of a person.



The danger of conformity bias in recruitment, is that our own judgement could be very, very wrong and could cause us to lose a great candidate for the job.