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## We Need to Come to Terms with Unconscious Bias



Credit: Seraphim Vector

**Training that increases our awareness of unconscious bias is useful but insufficient.**

In most situations, job interviewers try hard to be fair and treat all applicants equally. But they will probably be unaware of cognitive biases that can affect their interviewing behaviour and subsequent decision-making about the suitability of each applicant:

- in-group bias, which causes us to be more comfortable with and favour people like us – people who share the same gender, background, experience, interests or personality type;
- the halo effect, which causes us to allow the characteristics of others to affect our judgement of their other qualities (e.g. physically attractive people are more trustworthy);
- anchoring bias, which causes us to rely too much on an irrelevant piece of data or belief (e.g. one of the interviewers had previously hired a woman and it turned out badly);
- minority pool bias, which causes interviewers to evaluate more negatively applicants who comprise a minority of the applicant pool;
- confirmation bias, which causes us to notice data and information that conforms with our beliefs and to disregard any that doesn't; and
- availability bias, which causes us to grab readily available data to make decisions rather than use all available and relevant data, which will take longer to analyse.

In a common situation in engineering and science, a single female applicant among three or four male candidates starts out with an initial disadvantage, particularly if the interviewers are predominantly male. She has the minority gender among the applicants, and the biases listed above can further confuse the interviewers' judgement of the most appropriate applicant.

These factors can also be present in performance appraisals, promotions and other decisions about people. Therefore organisations need to examine in detail not just their written policies and procedures but their current practices in hiring, performance review and promotion of staff, and provide appropriate training. Some definitions may help.

- Cognitive bias is a systematic deviation from rational thinking when we make judgements and decisions, and has different causes. There are more than 150 known types of such bias.
- Unconscious bias occurs automatically, is not under our control and is triggered by our unconscious mind to make quick judgments and assessments of people and situations.
- Gender bias is the general name given to any type of bias that occurs in a situation involving gender.

Unconscious bias is reflected in prejudices and stereotypes that are deeply seated within us as a result of our genetics and socialisation. In increasingly popular "unconscious bias training", employees take tests that indicate where their biases are, the rationale being that if we are aware of our previously unknown biases we can train ourselves to think differently and make less biased judgements and decisions.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence that consciously realising an unconscious belief or association is sufficient to mitigate it. It may do so in some cases. Some unconscious biases can be extremely deep-seated because they are genetically inherited (e.g. in-group bias). Unconscious bias training is a good start, but the real question is what are employers doing to assist their staff to really deal with their unconscious biases and how are they addressing the conscious biases that we all have?

Most organisations that have written policies and procedures for recruitment, performance appraisal and promotion of staff believe that they manage these key processes well and that their decisions are based on "merit", which they regard as an objective concept but is actually very subjective. Unfortunately, current data on the number of women in middle and senior positions in industry and academia in Australia indicate that these beliefs are ill-founded and that gender bias is prevalent in many such organisations.

The problem is not only due to unconscious bias, as many commentators continue to claim, but to both conscious and unconscious bias and a lack of understanding of how bias can affect our decisions about people.



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Best practice would be for recruitment panels to discuss their own biases before interviewing candidates, to have at hand a description of biases relevant to recruitment, their causes and their mitigation and, after the interviews, to discuss how the panel mitigated its own biases.

How long will it take for business and academia to adopt such practices?

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