

HOW UNCONSCIOUS BIAS AFFECTS YOUR HIRING PROCESS



...and what to do about it



Have you ever hired someone based on a good feeling, even if you couldn't explain why they were the best person for the job?

Are you naturally drawn to people who have similar experiences or opinions to you? Are you comfortable making decisions based on gut instinct?

Most people would answer yes to at least one of these questions because we're all human.



WHAT IS UNCONSCIOUS BIAS?

Unconscious biases are learned stereotypes that are automatic, unintentional and able to influence our behaviour and thinking.

Learned stereotypes can have a significant impact on our thinking and decision making. In a workplace context, unconscious bias can impact the employee experience, organisational culture and overall performance.



As a leader, you have a responsibility to ensure everyone is treated fairly and given equal opportunity to demonstrate their suitability for the job.

- Cynthia Harris, Heart Talent

It's important for leaders and hiring managers to understand how unconscious bias can impact the recruitment process. Aside from the obvious impact on equality and fairness, biased hiring decisions result in less diverse teams.



The value of diversity in the workplace cannot be underestimated. Research shows that diverse teams are more productive, motivated, creative and engaged. Diversity and inclusion have been shown to improve business and organisational performance.

Two key things to understand are: unconscious bias is human nature, and it goes well beyond age, gender and race.

It is possible for unconscious bias to have a big impact, even before we meet a candidate.

Everything from the wording in job descriptions to the way you process CVs could have a serious effect on the final shortlist of candidates chosen for interview.



**Left unchecked, biases can shape the culture
and norms of a company and industry.**

Seeing is believing . . .

“If we don’t see male kindergarten teachers or female engineers, we don’t naturally associate men and women with those jobs, and we apply different standards. When hiring, promoting, and evaluating job performance, leaders need to learn to de-bias their practices and procedures.”

Iris Bohnet, behavioral economist and professor at Harvard Kennedy School





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**COMMON
UNCONSCIOUS BIASES**



1 FIRST IMPRESSION BIAS

While first impressions are important, you can't judge a book by its cover. First impression bias happens when a candidate looks and sounds great. They make a great first impression.

Because of this positive first impression, we might automatically assume they are great, and this can affect our interview and selection process.

First impression bias is considered one of the primary causes of hiring mistakes. When someone makes a great first impression and we've unconsciously leapt to the assumption that they're great, we tend to start seeing them through rose tinted glasses. This bias can make us less diligent in our interview process.

Because an effective, robust interview process is essential to making the best hiring decisions, it is critical that we always pay careful attention to asking insightful questions and really listening to the answers we receive.

Don't let a great first impression allow you to become too lax about how you interview.





2 THE HALO EFFECT

This phrase was coined in the 1920s by psychologist Edward Thorndike as a way to describe the way commanding officers in the army rated their soldiers.

The halo effect sees us focus our attention on one great aspect of a candidate that positively influences everything else we observe about them.

The halo could be how they communicate, exceptional skills in a particular area, a previous job with a blue-chip brand or the latest qualification relevant to the role. Remember, our task as interviewers is to identify reasons to hire as well as potential risks of hiring. The halo effect can blind us to such risks.

In an interview context, don't assume that because someone is friendly and you like them that they're also smart and will be good at their job.

This type of unconscious bias also makes us less diligent. A halo could be hiding horns. Don't forget to look for the horns.

3 THE HORNS EFFECT

This bias happens when our judgement is impacted by one negative thing about a candidate.

It could be how they present themselves or speak, something they say during the interview or something about their employment history. It's always important to look at the bigger picture and not let the horns effect or cloud your judgement.

As humans, we are all impacted by unconscious as well as conscious bias, including our ability to create our own subjective version of reality.

Cognitive bias theory demonstrates we notice flaws in others easier than we notice flaws in ourselves. When interviewing, be aware that a poor first impression or single negative aspect of a person or their interview could cloud your judgement for the rest of the interview.

Fight against this so that you can look past the horns and see the value that the candidate you're interviewing has to offer.





4 AFFINITY BIAS

Affinity is an essential part of human nature. We are naturally drawn to people who are like us. Cognitive bias theory demonstrates that we imagine things and people we are familiar with (or fond of) as better than things we are less familiar with or fond of.

Affinity bias causes us to see similar people in a positive light. This is where hiring managers and recruitment professionals need to be diligent with hiring for cultural fit. Hiring people who are similar to you and the rest of your team could have a negative impact on diversity.

Some examples of affinity bias to look out for include:

- you studied at the same university as the candidate
- you worked at the same company as the candidate
- you share hobbies, interests or life experiences with the candidate.

The danger with affinity bias is that we can tend to place too much importance on the things we have in common with the candidate, making us less diligent during the recruitment and selection process.

When you are interviewing, be sure to qualify skills, strengths and capabilities, especially for people with whom you have things in common. When we are under the influence of affinity bias, we can make disastrous assumptions which could have a significant impact and lead to poor hiring decisions.

5 CONFIRMATION BIAS

Confirmation bias is a tendency to interpret new information or evidence as confirmation of our existing beliefs. While this shows up in recruitment as an unconscious bias, it is also recognised as a cognitive bias.

We are drawn to details that confirm our own existing beliefs. In an interview context, confirmation bias can influence us to only seek information that supports our assumptions or beliefs about a candidate. Based on our impressions of someone from their CV, application or the start of an interview, we can easily be affected by first impression bias, affinity bias or the halo effect.

Confirmation bias can compound this, causing us to undervalue or ignore any new information or data we receive which conflicts with or doesn't support the early stage assumptions we've made.

When we are affected by confirmation bias, we tend to:

- not listen deeply
- stop probing for more information, examples or explanation
- skip or move on from crucial interview questions
- undervalue/ignore information that might conflict with assumptions/beliefs.

As you can see, these various unconscious biases can create the perfect storm.





HOW TO REDUCE UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN YOUR RECRUITMENT PROCESS

It's important to understand that unconscious biases are deeply ingrained, which makes them difficult to recognise and overcome. Left unchecked, each of these biases can impact the recruitment and selection process.

Here are some tips to help you.



ACCEPT

We are all
human. No
one is perfect.
We all have
biases.



LOOK IN THE MIRROR

If you are a decision maker, assess yourself to identify your opinions and stereotypes. Be brutally honest. Make sure you leave your bias and stereotypes at the door. To get you started on this journey, check out Harvard University's [Implicit Association Test](#).



REFLECT

Consider your existing team.

If you have a group of people who share similar backgrounds, attributes or demographic characteristics, you may have some unconscious biases that need to be addressed.

Tackling your own biases can only be beneficial. You'll end up with a more diverse, productive and engaged team and better business performance.



BUILD AWARENESS & UNDERSTANDING

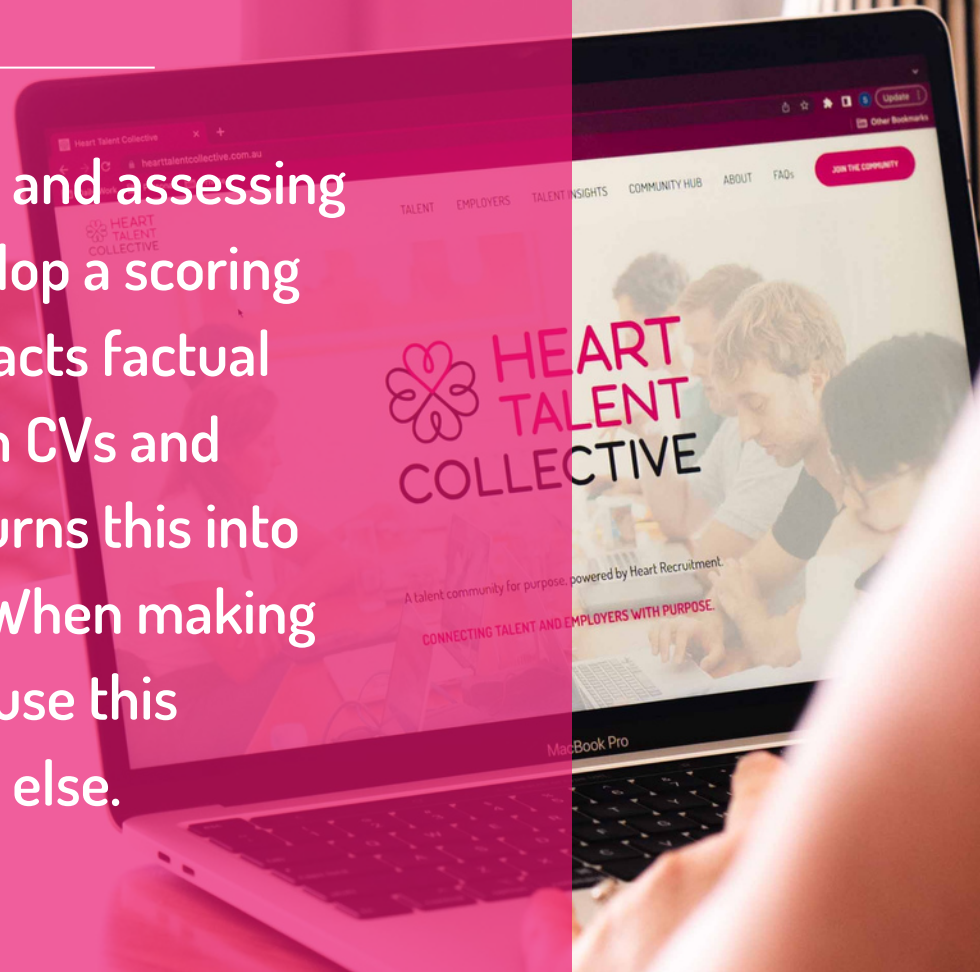
Start a conversation in
your organisation about bias.

By involving your team, you're
raising awareness, promoting
understanding and creating
ownership of this challenge and
the solutions you collectively
design to tackle it.



EVALUATE EACH CANDIDATE OR CV THE SAME WAY

When evaluating and assessing candidates, develop a scoring system that extracts factual information from CVs and interviews and turns this into numerical data. When making hiring decisions, use this data and nothing else.



CONSIDER BLIND CVs

If you really want to level the playing field, assess resumes 'blind' ie without names on them.

This enables you to focus only on candidates' experience and qualifications, not demographic characteristics.



PLAN & STANDARDISE INTERVIEWS

An effective interview starts with good planning. Design interview questions to uncover the most important data and discuss and decide what good/acceptable answers look like.

Stick to your interview plan and don't seek irrelevant personal information ie stick to questions about the inherent requirements of the role.

Interviews can and should be conversational, allowing all parties to get to know each other. However, it's important not to wander off down a random path of questioning. You simply won't get the data you need. It is possible to have a nice conversation and stick to your interview plan.



EMBRACE COLLABORATIVE HIRING

Create a hiring team to reduce the likelihood of bias. Interviewing with one or more colleagues is a great way to tackle bias.

If you don't share the same affinity biases with your colleagues, you're likely to have more diverse impressions and opinions of the candidates you're considering.



CHALLENGE YOURSELF

If you recognise that bias is affecting you, talk to one of your colleagues about it.

Having a sense-check with someone is a great way to build awareness and ensure you don't make a biased hiring decision.



TAKE YOUR TIME

Try not to make quick judgements about people.

Look at the bigger picture, and don't allow yourself to skip interview questions. Stick to your interview plan.



FOCUS ON THE EVIDENCE

Hiring decisions should never be made on intuition.

Once you understand these biases exist, you can begin to be aware of when they come into play in your interviews and recruitment process.

During an interview, focus on the evidence presented to you, not what you're expecting or hoping to find.



INCLUDE A SAMPLE TEST

Using a skills assessment or sample work exercise as part of your recruitment process provides an opportunity to objectively critique the quality of a candidate's work versus unconsciously judging them based on appearance, gender, age or personality.



SET DIVERSITY GOALS

Creating diversity goals for your organisation and recruitment process will put the issue of bias front and centre.

While research about the value of diversity in teams is abundantly clear, having diversity goals for your recruitment process will inherently build awareness of the impact of bias. At the end of each recruitment process, the hiring team can track their progress against these goals.



CHECK YOUR JOB DESCRIPTIONS AND RECRUITMENT MARKETING CONTENT

Words matter. Even the most subtle word choices can have a powerful impact. From the language in your job descriptions to job ads, your careers page, social media and any recruitment marketing content, always use inclusive, pro-diversity language.

Did you know that words like 'competitive' and 'determined' as well as adjectives like 'rockstar' and 'ninja' can prevent women from applying for a job?

You may be surprised to learn that there are thousands of problem phrases to be aware of. Augmented writing platform Textio has the scoop on this, using their language performance data to provide what they call 'bias interruption' advice.

Beyond automatic and unintentional stereotypes (aka unconscious bias), we all have an ability to create our own subjective 'version' of reality.

Heart is proud to be the only business supporting purpose-led organisations with flexible services across talent engagement and attraction and recruitment marketing.

We hope you find this guide to unconscious bias useful and welcome any questions or comments you may have. Please get in touch with Cynthia Harris at cynthia@hearttalent.com.au or 0432 044 527.





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