16 Unconscious Bias Examples and How to Avoid Them in the Workplace

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July 13, 2021 - Updated: September 21, 2021

If you're hiring based on 'gut feeling,' you're likely hiring on the basis of unconscious bias. The best way to prevent yourself from succumbing to these unconscious biases is to become aware of them and take action to prevent them when recruiting, hiring and retaining employees. Doing so will help your team build a more diverse and inclusive workplace.

WHAT IS UNCONSCIOUS BIAS?

Unconscious biases, also known as implicit biases, are the underlying attitudes and stereotypes that people unconsciously attribute to another person or group of people that affect how they understand and engage with a person or group.

To help, we've identified 16 examples of unconscious bias that commonly affect candidates and employees in the workplace. We've also provided some tips for ways to avoid them when hiring and retaining employees.

BIAS EXAMPLES

- Affinity Bias
- Confirmation Bias
- Attribution Bias
- Conformity Bias
- The Halo Effect
- The Horns Effect
- Contrast Effect
- Gender Bias
- Ageism
- Name Bias
- Beauty Bias
- Height Bias
- Anchor Bias
- Nonverbal Bias
- Authority Bias
- Overconfidence Bias

16 Types of Unconscious Bias in the Workplace

1. AFFINITY BIAS

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Affinity bias, also known as similarity bias, is the tendency people have to connect with others who share similar interests, experiences and backgrounds.

Affinity bias in the workplace: When companies hire for 'culture fit,' they are likely falling prey to affinity bias. When hiring teams meet someone they like and who they know will get along with the team, it's more often than not because that person shares similar interests, experiences and backgrounds, which is not helping your team grow and diversify. While similarities shouldn't automatically disqualify a candidate, they should never be the deciding factor, either.

Ways to avoid affinity bias: Actively take note of the similarities you share with the candidate so that you can differentiate between attributes that may cloud your judgement and the concrete skills, experiences and unique qualities that would contribute to your team as a 'culture add' rather than 'culture fit.'

2. CONFIRMATION BIAS

CONFIRMATION BIAS

Confirmation bias is the inclination to draw conclusions about a situation or person based on your personal desires, beliefs and prejudices rather than on unbiased merit.

Confirmation bias in the workplace: In hiring, confirmation bias often plays a detrimental role at the very beginning of the process when you first review a resume and form an initial opinion of the candidate based on inconsequential attributes like their name, where they're from, where they went to school and so forth. This opinion can follow you into the interview process and consequently steer questions to confirm the initial opinion of the candidate.

Ways to avoid confirmation bias: While every interview will lend itself to a unique conversation based on the individual's background, it's important to ask standardized, skills-based questions that provide each candidate with a fair chance to stand out. This will help prevent your team from asking too many off-the-cuff questions that may lead to confirmation bias.

3. ATTRIBUTION BIAS

ATTRIBUTION BIAS

Attribution bias is a phenomenon where you try to make sense of or judge a person's behavior based on prior observations and interactions you've had with that individual that make up your perception of them.

Attribution bias in the workplace: While this may seem harmless, humans are quick to judge and falsely assume things about a person without knowing their full story. When hiring, attribution bias can cause hiring managers and recruiters to determine a candidate unfit for the job because of something unusual on their resume or unexpected behavior during the interview.

Ways to avoid attribution bias: Rather than assume (because we all know what they say about assuming) a candidate is unfit for a job because they were late to the interview, ask them what happened — it could be totally innocent and unprecedented. If there is something on their resume or something they said during the interview that caused you to draw conclusions about the candidate, ask them further clarifying questions. Don't forget that interviewees are often nervous and may misspeak or stumble. Give them a chance to share their full story with you before you judge.

4. CONFORMITY BIAS

CONFORMITY BIAS

Conformity bias is the tendency people have to act similar to the people around them regardless of their own personal beliefs or idiosyncrasies — also known as peer pressure.

Conformity bias in the workplace: When your hiring team gets together to review a candidate's application materials and conduct the interview, conformity bias can cause individuals to sway their opinion of a candidate to match the opinion of the majority. The problem is the majority is not always right, which may cause your team to miss out on an excellent candidate because individual opinions become muddled in a group setting.

Ways to avoid conformity bias: Before you get your hiring team together to review a candidate, have them all write down and submit their individual opinions separate from one another immediately after the interview ends. Then have your team come together and review what everyone wrote down so you can hear their impartial opinions.

5. THE HALO EFFECT

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The halo effect is the tendency people have to place another person on a pedestal after learning something impressive about them.

The halo effect in the workplace: The halo effect can come into play at any stage of the hiring process. You may see a candidate worked at a highly regarded company or graduated from an elite school, but if there's anything we've learned about the 2019 College Admissions Scandal, it's to not judge a candidate on the merit of their name-brand education.

Ways to avoid the halo effect: The halo effect can be dangerously blinding when it comes to reviewing candidates. When reviewing a stack of applications, you are probably looking for something unique that makes a candidate stand out from the rest. When you do this, also consider the candidate without that one gleaming attribute and see how their experiences, skills and personalities compare to other candidates who may not have had the same privileges or opportunities.

6. THE HORNS EFFECT

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The horns effect is the tendency people have to view another person negatively after learning something unpleasant or negative about them.

The horns effect in the workplace: The direct opposite of the halo effect, the horns effect can cause hiring teams to weed out candidates based on a trait that is averse to the team's preferences. This could be something as trivial as the candidate working with a company you personally dislike or the candidate displaying a particular quirk or mannerism during the interview. Such traits may alter your perception of the candidate entirely even though it's a small factor that may not even be relevant.

Ways to avoid the horns effect: If you have a negative feeling about a candidate, take the time to figure out exactly where that 'gut feeling' is coming from. It may be something superficial or insignificant that shouldn't affect their chance at the role. You may also want to check with the rest of the interviewing team to understand the root of their opinions and preferences about a candidate.

7. CONTRAST EFFECT

THE CONTRAST EFFECT

The contrast effect is when you compare two or more things that you have come into contact with — either simultaneously or one-after-another — causing you to exaggerate the performance of one in contrast to the other.

Contrast effect in the workplace: This one is a bit of a mind-bender, but it's also one of the most common types of bias in the recruiting industry. When you're reviewing loads of candidates, it can be easy to compare one application to the next in the stack and determine which one is better from the other. An exceptionally good interview with one candidate may make the next one seem terrible.

Ways to avoid the contrast effect: Create a structured applicant review and interview process so that your team will be able to compare applications and interview answers as apples-to-apples rather than apples-to-pears. This also goes for <u>performance reviews</u> and rewards for individual employees.

8. GENDER BIAS

GENDER BIAS

Gender bias is the tendency to prefer one gender over another gender.

Gender bias in the workplace: It's no surprise that men are are all-too-often given preferential treatment over women in the workplace. But to put proof to the pudding, <u>one study found that</u> both men and women prefer male job candidates. So much so that, in general, a man is <u>1.5x more likely</u> to be hired than a woman.

Ways to avoid gender bias: Conduct blind screenings of applications that exclude aspects of a candidate that may reveal their assumed gender, like name and interests. Set diversity hiring goals to ensure your company holds itself accountable to equitable hiring practices. And again, make sure to compare candidates <u>based on skill and merit</u> rather than traits that can cloud your judgement of them.

9. AGEISM

AGEISM

Ageism in the workplace is the tendency to have negative feelings about another person based on their age.

Ageism in the workplace: Especially at American companies, ageism affects older people more often than younger people. 58% of workers start noticing ageism when they enter their 50s. At that point, it can be more difficult to change careers, find a job or move up in their careers because employers tend to value younger talent more and more — even though experience and expertise are critical skills for any successful business.

Ways to avoid ageism: Train your team members to understand the issue of ageism and debunk some of the myths about workers of different ages. Your company should also create a policy that prevents age bias along with hiring goals to keep age diversity top of mind when recruiting new talent.

10. NAME BIAS

NAME BIAS

Name bias is the tendency people have to judge and prefer people with certain types of names — typically names that are of Anglo origin.

Name bias in the workplace: This is one of the most pervasive examples of unconscious bias in the hiring process, and the numbers bear it out. One study found that white names receive 50% more callbacks for interviews than African American names. Additionally, applicants living in nicer neighborhoods also receive more callbacks for both white and African American names. Another study found that Asian last names are 28% less likely to receive a callback for an interview compared to Anglo last names.

Ways to avoid affinity bias: This one is simple. Omit the candidate's name and personal information - like email, phone number and address - from their application materials. You can either do this by assigning candidates a number or have an unbiased third-party team member omit this information for the hiring team until they bring a candidate in to interview. This will ensure that hiring teams are selecting candidates based on their skills and experiences without the influence of irrelevant personal information.

11. BEAUTY BIAS

BEAUTY BIAS

Beauty bias is a social behavior where people believe that attractive people are more successful, competent and qualified.

Beauty bias in the workplace: While appearances (race aside) are not protected by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, it is a form of bias that is prominent in the workplace. One study found that traditionally attractive people, both men and women, earn higher incomes, whereas less attractive people earn lower incomes. Another study found that attractive people are less likely to receive a job offer for roles that are low-paying or perceived to be beneath them. That may be because attractive people are viewed as more social, happy and successful.

Ways to avoid beauty bias: SHRM suggests that to avoid beauty bias, companies should create structured recruiting and interview processes so that your team will be able to compare applications and interviews equally and reduce the risk of bias. Having an initial phone screening rather than a video call or in-person interview can also help as well as utilizing unbiased technology to identify top candidates.

12. HEIGHT BIAS

HEIGHT BIAS

Height bias or heightism is the tendency to judge a person who is significantly shorter or taller than the socially-accepted human height.

Height bias in the workplace: This may seem a bit far-fetched, but one study found that a person who is six feet tall earns roughly $5,500 more per year than someone who is five and a half feet tall, regardless of gender, age or weight. Another study found that tall candidates are perceived as more competent, employable and healthy, which may explain why 58% of male CEOs at major companies are over six feet tall.

Ways to avoid height bias: Conducting blind interviews, phone interviews or video interviews will reduce your susceptibility to judge a person based on their height. Also simply knowing that this bias is a common social behavior will help you identify your bias against candidates.

13. ANCHOR BIAS

ANCHOR BIAS

Anchor bias or expectation anchor bias is when someone holds onto an initial, singular piece of information to make decisions.

Anchor bias in the workplace:

Anchor bias commonly occurs in the hiring process while comparing candidates. A recruiter may see one aspect of a candidate and then cannot "unsee" that characteristic while considering other applicants. For example, the first applicant a recruiter considers may request a significantly lower salary than the following candidates. This can create an expectation anchor bias that the latter candidates are asking for too much.

Ways to avoid expectation bias:

Try to compare every aspect of a candidate and never rely on one singular piece of information as a deciding factor. If you find yourself coming back to one piece of information you're comparing against, try omitting that anchoring piece of information and comparing candidates based on their other characteristics and qualifications.

14. NONVERBAL BIAS

NONVERBAL BIAS

Nonverbal bias is analyzing nonverbal communication attributes such as body language and letting it affect a decision or opinion.

Nonverbal bias in the workplace:

When you meet a candidate (whether it's in person or virtually) for an interview, nonverbal bias can creep in. Whether it's a weak handshake, folded arms, or difficulty holding eye contact, it's easy to take these cues as disinterest, overconfidence or an overall negative attitude. It's important to remember that the way a person moves through the world is not indicative of their true intentions or whether they will be a successful addition to your team or not.

Ways to avoid nonverbal bias:

Remember that everyone is different; this includes their mannerisms and ways of communicating physically. For example, if a candidate keeps their arms crossed in an interview, perhaps it's simply a nervous response. You can teach someone to uncross their arms but that doesn't mean they will bring necessary skills to their position.

15. AUTHORITY BIAS

AUTHORITY BIAS

Authority bias refers to when an idea or opinion is given more attention or thought to be more accurate because it was provided by an authority figure.

Authority bias in the workplace:

Authority bias is very easy to find in the workplace because hierarchies are already in place. Existing hierarchies make it incredibly easy to simply "follow the leader," even if the leader's ideas aren't what is best for the company or their employees. According to an article from Product Coalition, product veteran, Ken Sandy performed an interesting study with various product managers working across different companies and levels of seniority. One item the study found was that 95% of the product manager had fast-tracked a product or feature because of who told them to do it, not because of its importance or value.

Ways to avoid authority bias in the workplace:

Avoiding authority bias can be difficult depending on the culture of a workplace. One of the best ways to avoid this bias is to foster an environment of ideas, where others speak up and voice their own opinions and ideas.

16. OVERCONFIDENCE BIAS

OVERCONFIDENCE BIAS

The overconfidence bias refers to a person's tendency to be more confident in their capabilities than they should be.

Overconfidence bias in the workplace:

Overconfidence bias may not lead to the kinds of hiring and recruiting issues other biases cause but it can create conflict within an organization and cause a company to not live up to its potential. When overconfidence bias is allowed to flow freely, companies or employees with this bias do not believe they need to make improvements, thus affecting their own growth as well as the company's growth.

Ways to avoid overconfidence bias:

Simply enough, a great way to avoid overconfidence bias is to continue your work on the affinity bias and hire a diverse team that doesn't fall into the groupthink trap. It will be more difficult for overconfidence to take over if you foster a diverse and challenging environment.