

Guide to Unconscious Bias

How to empower the inclusion of people
in the workplace at AFRY

Welcome to AFRY's guide to unconscious bias

Rule number one when it comes to unconscious biases: Accept that we all have them and that it does not make us bad people. Being biased is being human. We need to challenge our biases and learn about them so that we can eliminate them.

When making decisions about people, we all like to think that we are objective, fair and impartial. It is not always that simple. We hope this guide will give you some new knowledge about how the brain works, help you get a better understanding of what unconscious bias is, and that you will feel confident enough to challenge your biases in your future decision making.

This guide is for all employees at AFRY, especially recruiting leaders and recruiters.

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Introduction to Unconscious Bias

Did you know:

- We are confronted with **11,000,000** pieces of information at any given moment.
- Our brains can only process **40** pieces of information at the same time.
- To compensate for this discrepancy between the information in front of us and the limited capacity of our brains, our brains compress and shorten the whole process.
- Our brain assumes that old, existing data is as valid as the information in front of us.
- We make quick decisions based on flawed and incomplete information and the result is illogical and can sometimes lead to discriminatory decisions and interpretations.
- In organisations, it can play a major role in important decisions, such as who receives a job or promotion.
- Experts have identified **150** different forms of unconscious bias.

Why bother?

Ok, so why waste time learning about unconscious bias? Well, at AFRY, research has taught us that inclusion, equity, diversity and belonging really is the key to success.

We know that inclusive and diverse teams with deep sector knowledge results in profitability, and innovation. For us, it is self-evident that all people have the same value and the right to enjoy the same opportunities. An inclusive and diverse workplace is also commercially and financially advantageous. For example, achieving at least 30% of women in leadership positions has been shown to make a significant difference to an organisation's profitability and market share (Grant Thornton, "Women in Business 2021").

At AFRY we strive to become one of the most attractive employers for female candidates, we have set ourselves the target to fill 40% of leadership positions with female and nonbinary leaders by 2030. This approach marks the starting point for the systematic work and long-term action needed to improve our position and to reach our 2030 ambitions.

Inclusion is an active act making sure that everyone feels welcome, safe, and valued.

Equity promotes justice by recognising that not everyone begins at the same place in society. Some people face conditions and circumstances that make it more challenging to achieve the same goals.

Diversity is the presence of differences that include race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, language, (dis)ability, age, religious commitment, or political perspective.

Belongingness is the human emotional need to be an accepted member of a group.

Our human reptile brain

Learning about our brain is an important first step when it comes to tackling our unconscious biases.

Kahneman (2011) distinguishes two types of thinking: system 1 and system 2.

SYSTEM 1 OF THINKING



Emotional
Quick
Instinctive
Automatic
Little/No Effort
Unconscious

SYSTEM 2 OF THINKING



Rational
Slower
Complex Decisions
More Logical
Effortful
Conscious

System 1 is the brain's fast, automatic, emotional response, unconscious thinking mode. This type of thinking requires little effort, but it is often prone to errors. Most everyday activities, like talking, bicycling, or knowing how to tie your shoelaces without a second thought, etcetera, make heavy use of the type 1 system. Unconscious biases are an example of system 1 thinking.

The type 2 system is a slow and conscious thought, where reason dominates the logical mode in which our brains operate when solving more complicated problems effortlessly. For example, System 2 thinking is used when looking for a friend in a crowd, solving a Sudoku puzzle or a problem at work.

Exercise: Visualisation

Imagine that you are running late for a flight. You have to hurry through security and you manage to make it on to the plane as the doors close.

When you have taken your seat, the pilot comes out to say hello and to wish you all a safe flight. When you have arrived at your destination you decide to have lunch at a restaurant where you see a happy couple celebrating their anniversary. You then head over to a tech conference where a CEO from a hot new start-up delivers an amazing presentation.

Now reflect on what you initially imagined: Was the pilot black? Was the couple two men? Was the tech CEO an older woman?

Take some time to think about your background and culture.

**What seems “normal” to you?
How do you think your previous experiences could impact your unconscious biases? How has the media had an impact?**





Common Types of Unconscious Bias

HOW THEY AFFECT YOU AND THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU

There are many unconscious biases, it's a jungle to investigate. But no worries, we have highlighted five biases that we think are particularly common and visible here at AFRY. These biases are of course used outside the work life too, therefore, you should learn about them to become a much better person.

1 Affinity Bias

"I LIKE YOU BECAUSE YOU ARE LIKE ME!"

We often gravitate towards people who are like us, whether it is based on appearance, background, or beliefs. When we have an affinity for those who are like us, we unintentionally shut out those who are different.

Affinity bias can result in a room full of people who all either look, think, and believe the same thing, leaving little room for new ideas and perspectives.

One of the most common unconscious biases in recruitment is affinity or similarity bias. This leads us to gravitate towards people who are like ourselves in appearance, beliefs, and background. We have an unconscious belief – "I prefer people like me over those who are different."

2 Gender Bias

PREJUDICE ABOUT YOUR GENDER

Unconscious gender bias is unintentional associations based on a person's gender, often stemming from traditions, values, social norms, or culture. Gender bias also refers to a person receiving different treatment based on the person's real or perceived gender identity.

3 Age Bias

JUDGMENTS ABOUT YOUR AGE

Age bias occurs when we make judgments about individuals solely based on their age. The assumption that all older people are frail and helpless is a common, incorrect stereotype. It's the same for younger people when it comes to work experiences and competence. As human beings we must simply try to be more open and inclusive towards people. This is especially important in recruitment situations. Always try to focus on the persons competence in a recruitment process, see beyond the persons age.



4 The Halo Effect

FIRST IMPRESSION-BASED JUDGEMENT, ALL POSITIVE

The halo effect is the tendency to use an overall positive impression of a person to influence other judgments of their character. Oftentimes, the halo effect begins as a first impression.

For example, if we perceive someone as being nice when we meet them, we may also think of them as intelligent, social, and generous— even if we have no information to base those judgments on.

5 The Horn Effect

FIRST IMPRESSION-BASED JUDGEMENT, ALL NEGATIVE

The horn effect is closely related to the halo effect. But instead of making a positive initial judgment, the horn effect starts with a negative judgement. This, in turn, causes us to assess other traits of the person negatively.

Other forms of biases

APPEARANCE BIAS

We can unconsciously make judgements on people based on their appearance.

Common examples:

- **Beauty Bias:** Individuals perceived as attractive are more likely to be treated positively.
- **Weight Bias:** This occurs when a negative judgement is caused by a person's weight.
- **Height Bias:** Taller people are more likely to be perceived as authoritative and leader-like, whereas shorter individuals (particularly men) are more likely to encounter negative height bias.

CONFIRMATION BIAS

We all have existing beliefs and values. Confirmation bias is the tendency to seek out and interpret new information in a way that confirms what you already believe.

ATTRIBUTION BIAS

Attribution bias affects how we assess other people and their achievements. When assessing ourselves, we tend to think our achievements are direct results of our merit and personality, while our failings are the result of external factors. When it comes to assessing other people, however, we often think the opposite is true. We are more likely to consider other people's achievements a result of luck or chance, and their failings because of their personality or behaviour.

STATUS QUO BIAS

This bias describes our preference for the way things are or for things to remain as they are, which can result in a resistance to change. Change is uncomfortable and recent numbers show that 95% of CEOs are white men. The status quo bias is leading board members to unconsciously prefer hiring white men for leadership roles. Understanding how unconscious bias affects our decisions is crucial to discover competent and diverse leaders!

IDIOSYNCRATIC RATER BIAS

Idiosyncratic rater bias affects the way we evaluate the performance of others. We often rate others based on our subjective interpretations of the assessment criteria and our own definition of what “success” looks like.

For example, a manager who excels at project management has higher standards for this skill and gives harsher ratings to team members for this skill. On the other hand, the manager is more moderate when rating team members' other skills because they are less familiar with that area.

CONFORMITY BIAS

Conformity bias is when our deep-seated need to belong causes us to adapt our behaviours to feel like part of a group. The conformity bias is the tendency people have to behave like those around them rather than using their own personal judgment. People seem to be more comfortable mimicking others, even regarding ethical matters.

PROXIMITY BIAS

Proximity bias is the idea that employees with close physical proximity to their team and company leaders will be perceived as better workers and ultimately find more success in the workplace than their remote counterparts.

Exercise: Affinity Bias

Affinity bias is the tendency for us to favour certain tasks, situations, and people. This is because they are more familiar to us. Affinity bias affects who we build relationships with, who we hire, who we ignore and how we provide our service to people.

Pick six of your friends, three from work and three from your private life. Do you share the same characteristics as your six friends?

Affinity bias Exercise

Pick six of your friends, three from work and three from your private life. Do you share the same characteristics as your six friends? Write the names on the spaces provided. Print this page and answer!

Tick ✓ if you share the same characteristic, and cross ✗ if not.

Names:						
Age						
Disability						
Education						
Marital status						
Pregnancy & parental status						
Race						
Religion & belief						
Gender or gender identity						
Sexual orientation						

REFLECTION

Based on your answers above, what unconscious biases do you have, and what do you plan to do to work on them?

How can we combat unconscious bias?

Fortunately, there is a lot we can do to combat unconscious bias and make a change in the workplace.



Accept that unconscious biases exist and question assumptions

The first step is to acknowledge that unconscious biases exist and that we all have preconceptions about people which we cannot control.

To overcome the bias that's built into our brains, we need to question our beliefs and decisions, even when they 'feel' right.

Next time you make a decision at work, take a step back, and ask yourself if any biases could be affecting that decision.



Fight the first impression

Studies have proven that you form your first impression of a person within the first 100 milliseconds. This proves that even before you have conscious thoughts about a person, you create your unconscious judgement, and the damage has already been done.

One way to recognize your unconscious biases is to write down and recognise what factors are ultimately determine your decisions.



Slow down your decision-making

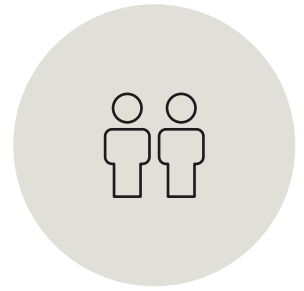
One of the interesting things about unconscious biases at work is that if you're interacting with other people, and you're also under pressure, the likelihood of being governed by your biases increases.

Slow down decision making at work to avoid mental shortcuts.

Increase contact with people who are different from you

We form an unconscious bias based on race, gender, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, marital status, education, and many other social categories. We also tend to socialize the most with people who are like us.

Break that pattern by interacting with people outside your in-group. That interaction will have a much greater effect if you work to form organic and genuine friendships with those people, rather than relying on casual or infrequent contact.



Take care of yourself

Implicit bias is more likely to arise when we are mentally or physically exhausted or highly stressed. This is because the brain is less effective at processing new information and relies more on unconscious patterns when stressed or tired.

Prioritise your own mental health and well-being. If you feel yourself getting stressed at work, give yourself a break.



Combat bias in processes and strategies

Changing the way your workplace operates is a powerful way to ensure that unconscious biases do not affect staff or anyone interacting with the business. Analyse all the different steps of your processes and plans. In doing so, you can work out how bias might infiltrate actions, such as decision making or day-to-day work, and how they will affect people.

For example, in recruitment:

- Ensure diverse interview panels.
- To assess candidates fairly, use specific language and examples when sharing feedback about them.
- Use standardized questions, which are written ahead of time, and closely related to the position.
- Go beyond hiring for “culture fit”: the term “culture fit” is vague, and it can mean different things to different people. Consider “cultural add” and alignment with AFRY values.

For more great insights have a look in our guide for Inclusive Recruitment.







Notice positive examples

Research shows that implicit bias responds to current input. In other words, new experiences can replace older data.

Tips: One way to take advantage of this is to focus your attention on the positive characteristics and actions of people who are outside your in-group. The idea is to create new and organic patterns and generalizations that are positive.



Empower accountability

As well as all employees taking individual responsibility to combat personal biases, managers should take accountability for inclusion and diversity.

Employees should also feel comfortable talking to managers about bias at work, and vice versa, as this helps us all develop.



Become an Ally

Allyship is a form of ambassadorship between people. An ally can be defined as someone who is not a member of a marginalised group but wants to support and take action to help others in that group. Allyship in the workplace is crucial for inclusion and equality.

How to be an effective ally

- Take on the struggle as your own.
- Transfer the benefits of your privilege to those who lack it.
- Amplify voices of the oppressed before your own.
- Acknowledge that even though you feel pain, the conversation is not about you.
- Stand up, even when you feel scared.
- Own your mistakes and de-center yourself.
- Understand that your education is up to you and no one else.





Summary

The clue is in the word 'unconscious'. We are not aware of our own biases because our brains cannot ponder while it is making a mental shortcut decision. Unconscious biases impact every area of decision-making in organisations including who gets hired, fired, promoted, and demoted.

Therefore, we need to keep challenging our biases and learn about them so that they can be eliminated. We hope this guide has given you some new knowledge and helped you get a better understanding of what unconscious bias is and how you can challenge biases in your future decision making.



Do a deep dive

Wanna know more? Have a look at these links below:

[Unconscious bias in the workplace - Definitions & Solutions](#)

[Implicit or Unconscious Bias](#)

[Identifying 9 Types of Unconscious Bias at Work](#)

[19 Unconscious Bias Examples and How to Prevent Them](#)

[10 benefits of diversity in the workplace](#)

[What Are Some Ways To Break Your Implicit Bias?](#)

[11 steps to reduce unconscious bias in the hiring process](#)

[How to eliminate first impression bias](#)

[The Guide to Allyship](#)

[How to be an ally in the workplace](#)

Don't miss our other guides: Inclusive Recruitment Guide, Inclusive Communication Guide and AFRY's Guide to LGBTQI+







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We are 19,000 devoted experts in infrastructure, industry, energy and digitalisation, creating sustainable solutions for generations to come.

Making Future