

# UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE

## WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW CAN HURT YOU

We all have biases, both in and out of the workplace. If we're aware of these biases, we can work to overcome them or, at the very least, to ensure they don't influence important interactions or decisions. But what if we're not aware of them? What if a bias is so deeply ingrained that we don't even know it exists?

*What if the bias is, literally unconscious?*



## What is Unconscious Bias?

Simply put, an unconscious bias is a deeply subconscious attitude towards race, gender, appearance, education, demeanor, family background or a multitude of other factors. Unconscious biases are usually formed, perpetuated and, most importantly, activated without our conscious knowledge. That being the case, they are extremely difficult to control and even the most well-meaning among us may be under their influence without even realizing it.

As an example, let's take Ken, a 38-year old Human Resources Manager. At age 15, he was denied a spot on the high school football team. Now, twenty-three years later, he unconsciously harbors a bias against high school and college athletes and—unbeknownst to him—often makes hiring decisions that penalize those whose resumes mention athletic achievement. Clearly, this is a benign example. But replace “college athlete” with “woman,” “African American,” “community college graduate,” “military veteran,” “overweight” or “born in Texas” and we begin to see just how serious a problem this can be.

## How Might Unconscious Bias Manifest in the Workplace?

Unconscious bias on the part of business owners, managers, human resources and employees can have a significant impact on all aspects of the workplace—from hiring decisions to employee relations and company morale.

Here are some of the common problem areas:

### Hiring practices.

Unconscious bias based on gender, age, race, religion, college affiliation or country of origin may cause hiring managers to reject the most qualified candidates.

### Delegation of responsibilities.

Decisions that should be based solely on skills and knowledge may be influenced by unconscious biases about appearance, marital status and more.

### Promotions and raises.

Even today, an unconscious bias towards men as the “traditional breadwinners” may influence decisions on who moves up in an organization.

### Morale and productivity.

When managers favor or penalize employees due to unconscious biases—as opposed to actual performance, dedication and results—morale and productivity can be compromised.

## How Can Unconscious Bias Cost a Business?

Although the concept of unconscious bias may seem vague at times, the impact on a company's bottom line is very real. As discussed earlier, unconscious bias can lead to subpar workplace decisions which, in turn, can lead to subpar results in terms of process, productivity and profits. Here are just a few examples of how unconscious bias can compromise your results:

**Underuse of valuable resources.** Unconscious bias towards specific employees can lead managers to underuse or misuse their talents. In addition to compromising productivity this can reduce the return on a company's investment in recruitment and training.

**Recruitment and retention issues.** A company with a reputation for pervasive bias against a certain group of employees may find it difficult to attract quality candidates from that group—especially if this reputation results in negative reviews online. In addition, the bias will often lead to high turnover within that group, regardless of salary levels or titles.

**Poor financial performance.** According to many recent studies, there is a high correlation between a company's gender, ethnic, and cultural diversity in relation to their bottom line. Unconscious bias that limits diversity can actually lead to compromised financial results.

**Legal liabilities and lawsuits.** While unconscious bias in and of itself is neither illegal nor provable in a court of law, the tangible manifestations—including employment discrimination based on race, gender, age, disability or sexual orientation—can lead to costly litigation and penalties.

## How Can a Company Reduce the Impact of Unconscious Bias?

Short of mind control and psychological reprogramming—proven highly effective only in science fiction and action movies—there is really no way to eradicate unconscious bias. That said, remedial efforts must focus on reducing its role in—and impact on—an organization. Here are a few practical suggestions:

**Raise awareness of the problem.** The first step towards remediation is education. Make sure that executives, managers and employees understand what unconscious bias is, how it manifests and how it can negatively impact the workplace.

**Encourage and facilitate introspection.** Ask everyone in the organization to consider what, if any, unconscious biases they may harbor. If possible, facilitate the thought process via workshops and group “therapy” sessions.

**Spotlight diversity and inclusion.** Stress the importance of diversity and inclusion to executives and managers. Foster an environment in which they can apply these concepts and hold them accountable for their decisions and actions.

**Establish goals and monitor progress.** Formalize your “anti-bias” efforts by establishing quantifiable goals—such as developing a more diverse workforce—and regularly track and evaluate the results.

Left unexplored and unchecked, unconscious bias can lead to serious consequences, both operationally, financially and legally. Fortunately, a little consciousness raising can go a long way towards creating a cohesive workplace and a healthier company on many levels.