

Minimising the impact of unconscious bias during the interview process

What is unconscious bias?

Unconscious bias refers to a bias that we are unaware of, and which happens outside of our control. It is a bias that happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences.

(ECU: 2013 *Unconscious bias in higher education*)

How can it influence the interview process?

Although we all like to think we are open-minded and objective, research shows consistently across all social groups that this is not the case. We are heavily influenced in ways that are completely hidden from our conscious mind in how we view and evaluate both others and ourselves. Here are some common forms that may occur during interview:

Bias	Description
Affinity bias	Showing a preference for candidates who are like us and making more of an effort to put these candidates at ease.
Confirmation bias	Making assumptions about a candidate's ability to do the job - subconsciously seeking evidence to confirm our pre-existing opinions, while rejecting evidence that contradicts our assumption.
Contrasting	Allowing the experience of interviewing one candidate to affect how other candidates are interviewed – candidates are compared and contrasted against each other, rather than measured on their individual performance against the job description and pre-determined selection criteria.
Halo and horns effect	Rating a candidate as 'good' or 'bad' across the board, often influenced by an unconscious first impression based on a particular characteristic. For example, a physically attractive candidate with a winning smile could be thought of as good; a candidate with visible tattoos may be considered bad.
Stereotyping	Assuming that the traits of certain candidates will make them better or worse in the role. For example, assuming that women will be more concerned with family and less committed to the job or that older candidates will struggle with technology.

What can we do?

Once we accept that we all naturally use subconscious mental shortcuts, then we can take time to consider them and reflect on whether such implicit thought processes are inappropriately affecting the objectivity of our decision-making during an interview process. We can achieve more fairness and improve the quality of decision making if we have a commitment to question where unconscious bias might be influencing decisions. Polite challenge is possibly the most powerful form of mitigating bias - respectful intervention can

increase accountability and improve decision-making. Remember it's easier to recognise bias in others than in ourselves.

Practical steps

- ❑ Aim to establish a diverse Selection Panel; research shows that different perspectives can lead to better decision-making. Ensure that all members of the interview panel have a voice and are able to share their opinions. This will help combat the dangers of 'group-think'¹.
- ❑ Develop evaluation criteria linked to the job specification and apply them consistently to each candidate.
- ❑ Take time to develop a structured set of interview questions and ensure that these questions are consistently applied to each candidate.
- ❑ Ensure that each of your interview questions is targeted to assess the essential criteria as set out in the job description.
- ❑ Avoid comparing each candidate against the previous interview – a candidate's evaluation should not be contingent on who was interviewed immediately before them. Instead, independently score each individual against the criteria and then have discussion as a Panel at the end of the interview process where you share your ranking of candidates based on the evaluation criteria. Any difference in ranking can then be discussed within the context of the job description and the evaluation criteria until a consensus of opinion is reached.
- ❑ Do not make decisions based on a candidate being a 'good fit'. This can lead to individuals recruiting and promoting the people who are most like themselves. Focus instead on the specific reasons for a 'poor fit' and explore whether these reasons are evidence-based or if they reflect biases and a tendency to recruit individuals who are similar to yourself.
- ❑ Ensure that all of your decisions are evidence-based and can be supported by factual feedback based on interview performance and the job criteria. Do not use any casual conversation that may have taken place outside of the structured interview as a deciding factor.
- ❑ And finally....take your time and schedule breaks for the Panel. Research shows that our unconscious bias has a more pronounced impact on decision-making when time pressures or other distractions exist.

**This guidance should be considered within the context of the University Resourcing
Guidance that is available online at**

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/hr/resourcing/practicalguidance/>

¹ **Groupthink** is a term first used in 1972 by social psychologist Irving L. Janis that refers to a psychological phenomenon in which people strive for consensus within a group. In many cases, people will set aside their own personal beliefs or adopt the opinion of the rest of the group. People who are opposed to the decisions or overriding opinion of the group as a whole frequently remain quiet, preferring to keep the peace rather than disrupt the uniformity of the crowd.