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# Understanding Unconscious Bias

What exactly is  
unconscious bias?  
Why should you  
care about it?

Great strides have been made in equality legislation over the years, and in our experience, the majority of UK & Ireland employers welcome diversity within their organisations and the undeniable value it brings, but what happens when unconscious bias creeps in? What exactly is unconscious bias? Why should you care about it?

Put simply, unconscious bias occurs when we favour those people who are most like ourselves: who look like us or share our values. It can cause us to be drawn to people with a similar educational background, from the same area or of the same colour or ethnicity. It's both natural and unintended: but that doesn't mean it's right – because unconscious bias can significantly impact our decision making. It also means that in the world of business employers risk overlooking talented employees in favour of people who simply remind them of themselves.

## The good news? It can be mitigated.

Our decisions are quite naturally influenced by everything from our personal backgrounds to our life experiences. This can be incredibly helpful when we are faced with a dangerous situation – allowing us to think (and act) quickly – but it can also be problematic when that same system causes us to make unfairly weighted decisions.

Unconscious bias occurs when we make quick judgements without realising. It's not a callous act; it's not a conscious act, but when unconscious bias presents itself against protected characteristics (age, disability, gender reassignment, sexual orientation, race, religion or belief, pregnancy and maternity, and marriage and civil partnerships – all protected by the Equality Act 2010) it is deemed discriminatory.

**7** It's both natural and unintended: but that doesn't mean it's right – because unconscious bias can significantly impact our decision making. **L**

Aside from the legal headache, no forward-thinking employer in today's fast-moving economy can afford to lose the various benefits a diverse workforce brings. So it's important to understand how unconscious bias can rear its ugly head and in what form:



### **Affinity Bias**

The tendency to warm to people like ourselves



### **Halo Effect**

The tendency to think that everything about a person is good because we like them



### **Perception Bias**

The tendency to form stereotypes and assumptions about certain groups; making it impossible to form objective judgements about members of those groups



### **Confirmation Bias**

The tendency to seek information that confirms pre-existing beliefs or assumptions (and to ignore those that suggest otherwise)



### **Group Think**

When people try too hard to fit into a particular group by mimicking others, or holding back their own thoughts and opinions

It's very possible that the presence of the first four types of unconscious bias could lead an employee to adopt the 'group think' mentality in order to fit in and feel accepted. The danger here is that 'group think' causes people to sacrifice their identity, and organisations to lose out on the creativity and innovation that diversity affords. Perceived discrimination can also negatively impact employee performance: if someone thinks they are being discriminated against, their job satisfaction will take a hit, their personal performance could suffer and workplace tensions are likely to arise.

In any workplace, unconscious bias can have a profound effect on recruitment, promotion and mentoring if steps aren't taken to recognise and eradicate such behaviours from the decision-making process. It can be easily accomplished by educating business leaders and employees on how to recognise when they're being biased.

Over the coming weeks, Adecco will be carrying out in-depth research to learn more about unconscious bias and its implications in the workplace. We will be translating this research into a number of invaluable advice pieces to help employers avoid unconscious bias.

**In the meantime, if you're curious to understand the extent to which you might be 'unconsciously biased', try your hand at this simple test:**

[implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html)

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# Understanding Unconscious Bias

The UK & Ireland  
Recruitment Landscape

Following on from Adecco's 'Understanding Unconscious Bias' piece, where we explained the potentially damaging effects of unconscious bias on recruitment, retention and engagement, we can now bring you the results of our research into the landscape of UK & Ireland hiring.

We were keen to understand the priorities of hiring managers throughout the recruitment process when considering a candidate, whilst attaining a tighter grip on the current status quo within organisations when it comes to workplace diversity.

The results show while unconscious bias is, by definition, not pre-judged, a greater push for better training is desperately needed.

## Hiring Priorities

When asked which three pieces of information they take into account above any other, when deciding who to progress to the next stage of the recruitment process, employment experience is still the highest ranking accolade for the majority (70%) of UK & Ireland hiring managers. Interestingly, employment experience is of least importance in London (58%), against 92% in Northern Ireland.

Education was surprisingly low in terms of priorities – ranking in the top three for only 27% of our survey respondents; this figure did however rise to 39% and 53% for the legal and education sectors, but dipped far lower (14%) in travel and transport.

Sadly, both age and gender made the list – with 6% of hiring managers placing one or both factors amongst their top three considerations. In terms of sectors, gender plays the biggest role in IT and telecoms (13%), whilst no one in sales, media and marketing afforded it any credence.

Regionally, age is of greatest importance in London, the South East and Wales (9%) and of the least (1.7%) in the North West.

Beyond the decision to progress a candidate, we wanted to pinpoint the most important factor for hiring managers when it came to making an offer of employment: after relevant experience, attitude ranked second highest at 25% – rising to 35% in HR, and dropping to 7% in manufacturing. This means that if a candidate lacks experience but demonstrates a positive approach to work; it may play a key part in them being employed.

Cultural and team fit also placed, but this was found to be more important in smaller companies than in large organisations (at 10% and 5% respectively) where workplaces are perhaps more ‘close knit’. Surprisingly, team fit is most important for hiring managers in the finance sector (15%), against just 3% in engineering and more important in the South West (14%) than in the East and East midlands (3%).



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## CV Protocol

If you were forced to remove a piece of information from a CV, what would it be? We asked our survey respondents just that – and the results surprised us.

The majority (25%) would drop age, but this should not be included on any CV, given that age is a protected characteristic under the 2010 Equality Act. Interestingly, fewer men would remove age than women, at 19% and 30% respectively.

Age was closely followed by hobbies (it would seem that today's hiring managers are not interested in the pastimes of potential new recruits) – although in London, only 16% would eradicate hobbies, against 32% in the North East. This may be due to a higher volume of candidates demonstrating similar skill sets in London, so there is a need to show differentiation, or down to the 'London culture', where socialising with your colleagues is far more commonplace than throughout the rest of the UK & Ireland – making shared interests of greater importance.

Only 8% of our survey respondents would remove names from a CV – a figure that rises to 21% in the West Midlands, and falls to 5% in the South East. Names could of course be indicative of ethnicity, and the decision to exclude them from CVs could help to remove unconscious bias at this level.



of female hiring managers would remove age from a CV



of hiring managers in the North East would eradicate hobbies from a CV



of our survey respondents would remove names from a CV

**7** Names could of course be indicative of ethnicity, and the decision to exclude them from CVs could help to remove unconscious bias at this level.



## A Diverse Playing Field?

In order to show a more precise picture of the current status quo from a diversity perspective, we asked our survey respondents about the religious, socio-economic and educational backgrounds of their colleagues.

Most (75%) agreed that their colleagues were from diverse religious backgrounds, but this figure dropped sharply to 55% of those in the education sector. It was also a less positive story in the South East at 58%, compared to the West Midlands (88%).

Things were a little more encouraging when examining social backgrounds, with 80% of participants agreeing there is diversity among their colleagues in this area. The figure did however drop to 70% for both the HR and manufacturing sectors – perhaps a nod to the hiring practices and candidate reach of these industries.

In terms of education, only 53% of our survey respondents said that the majority of their colleagues are university educated, which rather surprisingly dipped to 30% in legal, and rose to 65% in HR. There was also geographical variance, with figures of 41% in the South West, against 68% in London – where the high proportion of professional roles appear to attract a greater proportion of graduates.

 **80%**

of participants agreed there is diversity among their colleagues when examining social backgrounds

 **53%**

of our survey respondents said that the majority of their colleagues are university educated



Most (75%) agreed that their colleagues were from diverse religious backgrounds.



# Training Deficit Rings Alarm Bells

Somewhat alarmingly, 39% of the hiring managers that we surveyed admitted to having never been trained in best practice around unconscious bias in their current company. Whilst of those who have, 11% haven't had a refresher or update in the past two years.

The problem is exacerbated in smaller companies with less than 50 employees, where nearly two-thirds of hiring managers (63%) are without training – compared to 27% in companies with over 250 employees.

In terms of sectors, finance comes out on top: only 19% of hiring managers in this area report an absence of training around unconscious bias – perhaps owing to more stringent governance – while a worrying 57% of those in travel and transport are working without guidance.

Hiring managers in the West Midlands appear to be the most highly trained at 72%, against just 49% in the South East.

 **39%**

of the hiring managers that we surveyed admitted to having never been trained in best practice around unconscious bias in their current company

 **63%**

of hiring managers in small companies are without training

 **57%**

of those working in travel and transport are hiring without guidance

**7** In smaller companies with less than 50 employees, nearly two-thirds of hiring managers (63%) are without training – compared to 27% in companies with over 250 employees. **L**

# Unconscious Bias: Policies & Procedures

Almost a third of companies (29%) are without any current policies or guidelines around unconscious bias and how to avoid it during the recruitment process. Even more worryingly, 10% of hiring managers in companies with policies in place have never read them, while a further 10% do not know if their company has either policies or guidelines.

Things are worse still in smaller companies: of those with fewer than 50 employees, more than half are without guidelines – compared to 17% of companies with more than 250 employees. While in terms of sectors, engineering companies are the worst offenders, with finance and legal coming out on top (only 15% lack any form of policies or guidelines around unconscious bias).

Somewhat reassuringly, 95% of hiring managers at companies with policies in place believe they are practiced effectively.

 **10%**

of hiring managers in companies with policies in place have never read them

 **95%**

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7

Almost a third of companies (29%) are without any current policies or guidelines around unconscious bias.

L

# The Role of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

AI is being employed in some businesses to help reduce the occurrence of unconscious bias as part of the recruitment process – and while only a fifth of our survey respondents reported having introduced AI within their organisations, a further quarter said they are looking into it.

We also found that the larger the company, the more likely it is that AI has been introduced: just 9% of businesses with fewer than 50 employees had implemented AI, against 30% of companies with more than 50 workers.

Sales, media and marketing make the greatest use of AI at 38%, compared to just 5% of engineering companies; while London and the West Midlands are ahead of the game at 28% and 29% respectively – whilst the South East are lagging behind with just 11% stating they use it.



**38%**

of sales, media and marketing  
companies make use of AI  
when hiring



**30%**

of companies with more  
than 50 workers had  
implemented AI



Only a fifth of our survey respondents reported having introduced AI within their organisations.



## Blind CVs

The use of blind CVs, where only a candidate's skills are noted, can be useful in helping hiring managers to avoid unconscious bias during the recruitment process; at least during the initial selection process. However, less than a third of the hiring managers that we surveyed have adopted this technique.

A slightly more positive 23% are currently looking into the implementation of blind CVs – which are most widely used in the legal sector (62%) and most infrequently employed in travel and transport (14%).

Small companies are once again lagging behind at only 17%, compared to a 35% take-up amongst businesses with more than 50 employees. Geographically, London and the West Midlands are the most prolific users of blind CVs – at 39% and 41% respectively – compared to 23% in the South West.



**23%**

are currently looking into the implementation of blind CVs

Most prolific users of blind CVs

**39%** > London

**41%** > West Midlands



Less than a third of the hiring managers that we surveyed have adopted blind CVs.



# Making a Change

The apparent lack of training provided by organisations on the subject of unconscious bias is a real cause for concern.

Unconscious bias is precisely that: unconscious; not intentional – and if hiring managers aren't given the tools they need to help them make well-rounded decisions when it comes to recruitment, then organisations are going to find themselves short-changed by the lack of diversity within their walls.

As we touched on in the first piece of this series, diverse organisations are best placed to succeed in today's competitive economy: the vast range of different skills, outlooks and experiences are invaluable to any forward-thinking employer.

That's why the third and final piece of our Unconscious Bias series will focus on the steps that your company can take to eradicate unconscious bias, and ensure a healthy level of diversity at every stage of the hiring process.



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# Addressing Unconscious Bias

What can you do to  
prevent unconscious bias  
in the workplace?

Unconscious bias – and with this, an accompanying lack of workplace diversity, can have profoundly negative effects on a business. Recruitment can be impacted, engagement levels can be damaged and retention rates can plummet; so, what can we do about it?

In the second instalment of our Unconscious Bias campaign, 'Understanding Unconscious Bias: The UK & Ireland Recruitment Landscape', we brought you the results of our research where we looked to better understand the current status quo within UK & Ireland organisations.

One of the most alarming findings to emerge from our research was the apparent lack of training given to hiring managers in relation to unconscious bias: we found that 39% of the hiring managers surveyed had never been trained in best practice around unconscious bias in their current company. Whilst of those who had, 11% had not received any form of refresher or update in the past two years.



**39%**

of the hiring managers surveyed had never been trained in best practice around unconscious bias in their current company



**11%**

of the hiring managers surveyed had not received any form of refresher or update in the past two years

**7** Unconscious bias may not be intentional, but it is preventable.



# Taking steps to eradicate unconscious bias

**Provide regular training:** Rather tellingly, when asked which method would be most effective in helping people to avoid unconscious bias during the recruitment process, regular training came out on top. Clearly, hiring managers want to receive more support in this area. Perhaps because they recognise the benefits: over half believe they would see a more diverse workforce, while the same proportion think performance would be improved if hiring decisions were purely based on skillset and suitability.

**Set clear company policies:** Our research uncovered the somewhat shocking statistic that almost a third of companies (29%) are without any current policies or guidelines around unconscious bias, and how to avoid it during the recruitment process. The first step to enacting change within any organisation is to set clear parameters: HR is best placed to manage and communicate key company policies, so we would urge employers to agree on and formulate appropriate guidelines and policies around unconscious bias, and HR to ensure an effective communication programme is delivered.

**Utilise technology:** Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be invaluable in the fight against unconscious bias, and while only a fifth of our survey respondents employed AI within their organisations, a further quarter are looking into it. MeVitae, in conjunction with the Oxford University Physics Department, is building the first ever technological alternative to unconscious bias training: Vivek Doraiswamy, Co-Founder and CTO of MeVitae, spoke of how AI will be used to decode the neural behaviours of hiring employers in order to determine patterns on what employers look at in CVs. In turn, this will “build a bias correction algorithm that scores, ranks and shortlists candidates for jobs, irrespective of social class, race, ethnicity, gender, disabilities, etc. through big data and artificial intelligence.”

From implementing company policies and guidelines and introducing targeted training schemes, to employing something as advanced as AI or as simple as blind CVs, organisations have a multitude of avenues open to them.

Tackling unconscious bias should be one of the chief areas of investment and focus for any organisation in today's tough economy. By eradicating unconscious bias from the hiring process, and within the workplace itself, companies will benefit from increased diversity, heightened engagement and greater collaboration, all whilst encouraging creativity and fostering innovation.

# Get in touch

Unconscious bias (and how to address it) can be a difficult topic to navigate if you have never tackled it before. We hope that our campaign and the findings of our research have given you some food for thought, but if you would like to discuss the next steps for your organisation then we would be delighted to hear from you.

Get in touch with your local branch today.



[adecco.co.uk/find-a-branch](https://adecco.co.uk/find-a-branch)

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