

Avoiding Unconscious Bias in the Recruitment Process

What is unconscious bias?

An unconscious bias is when our background, personal experiences and social stereotypes influence the decisions we make. These elements influence automatically and without us being aware of it, because they are often so ingrained in culture and sub-conscious.

The recruitment process is one area where we must become more conscious about how under-pinning beliefs can impact on the decisions we make as unconscious bias can run through every element of the process. It is also important not to make assumptions about a candidate and instead we need to look for the evidence or explore assumptions so that they can be established or not, e.g. rather than assuming an absence of a grade on a qualification means the candidate did not complete or pass we should ask.

It is important to treat people as individuals, and avoid making assumptions about anyone on the basis of broad categorisations or in some cases prejudices. Don't make assumptions which can be influenced by unconscious bias – ask the candidate and discuss with the rest of panel to avoid unconscious bias influencing you to make unfounded assumptions. We recruit in panels to make decisions considered, merit based and to avoid individual assumptions or bias influencing.

Shortlisting

- ✓ **Make decisions based on the quality of the candidate's experience, not the amount of time they have spent doing this.**
- ✓ **Measure each person against the person specification**
- ✗ **Don't build stories about candidates or making assumptions about why they have made job changes/career decisions or make decisions based on your belief of what is in the candidate's best interest**

For example:

- The candidate is 'overqualified'. They may have more qualifications and

experience than this role demands, but this does not mean that they are not the best person for the role

- The candidate has worked previously at a more senior level – does this matter, if they are motivated and capable of carrying out this role?
- The candidate lives a distance from where the job is based. You may not want to commute, but the candidate may be quite happy with the journey or indeed planning to relocate.



Don't use dates to work out a candidate's age because this is irrelevant



Don't typify a candidate from their application form



Don't compare candidates to each other

Interviewing and Testing

First impressions

First impressions can be powerful and can influence the way we interpret a candidate's performance during an interview. If you have a strong first impression it is important that you are aware of this and do not let it influence the next impressions or answers given.



Set first impressions aside to concentrate on interview/selection performance. It is important to update your first impression on the whole process rather than letting this dictate the whole process.

Gut Feel

Gut instinct is natural but can be fatally flawed as these feelings are based on an internal view of how a person 'sits' measured against our own unconscious belief systems. It is pointless to tell you not to have gut feelings, as you often will.



Do be aware of your instincts, but,



don't let these influence the way you ask questions and interpret the answers



After the interview, share any gut feel you had with your panel members; it may well be that your colleagues are able to provide evidential reasons which

explain your internal reaction.

Confirmation Bias

Because of strong first impressions or gut feel, an interviewer may be inclined to steer the conversation into a certain direction in a subconscious desire to confirm their own bias or assumptions or first impressions. This is known as **confirmation bias** and can result in either the **'halo' effect** – which is a positive affirmative bias – where everything the candidate says is funnelled through a positive filter; or the **'horns' effect** where the candidate's answers are interpreted negatively.

Research suggests that in job interviews, people are often inclined to judge someone more positively when the candidate reminds the interviewer of themselves, known as **Similar to Me bias**. Not only does this create unconscious bias, but this flawed type of recruitment can result in a team of people who are very similar to each other and lack diversity in personality, experiences, behaviours and skills.

Testing

Testing should be carried out based on the business needs of the role, testing will strengthen the validity of the recruitment decision and tends to be less subjective and therefore provide less opportunity for bias to creep in.

- ✓ **Test for the level of skill required and model outcomes so that you know before you administer the assessment what a good result looks like.**
- ✓ **Use English tests with care, ensuring that they represent the level of language required for the candidate to be effective in the role.**
- ✓ **Remember to ask HR for advice about 'reasonable adjustment' for tests and interview processes for a candidate who has declared a disability.**

Decision-Making

✓ **Base your recruitment decisions based on the candidate's suitability to carry out the role, measured against the person specification you are recruiting against, and evidencing this against the whole selection process and not just one aspect like the interview.**

✗ **Avoid introducing any new or spurious criteria which is irrelevant and based on personal bias or prejudice.**