

Mitigating Unconscious Bias in Hiring Practices



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Message from Chancellor Jennifer Mnookin

Hello. I'm Chancellor Jennifer Mnookin. Over the past several years, UW–Madison has made important strides towards improving our campus culture and working to create equitable learning and working environments for everyone, diversifying our workforce, and building on our inclusive excellence.

As we continue this work, I encourage everyone to engage in the topics explored in this video. Everyone has some degree of unconscious bias. These are deeply held, automatic preferences that often tilt toward the familiar ... sometimes for people whose names and faces and language are more like our own.

Becoming aware of unconscious bias as a risk is one step in our ongoing process to make our workplace fairer. This can be especially important for marginalized employee populations. Unconscious bias can show up in lots of ways, but one of them is specifically within hiring processes.

This video will provide some tools and resources to consider when engaging in hiring practices so that we can be sure to try to do our very best to be as fair as possible. All of the work we do at this great university depends on recruiting and hiring a talented and diverse workforce and making this a community where everyone can flourish, and where people want to stay.

I want to thank you for your commitment to understanding and addressing unconscious bias, and more generally to working to build a healthy, equitable, fair, and inclusive work environment that will keep UW–Madison as one of the finest universities in the nation and in the world.

Message from Deputy Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion, Dr. LaVar J. Charleston

I'm LaVar J. Charleston. The work we do together to recruit and retain a talented, diverse workforce plays an important role in shaping our campus community. UW–Madison's missions of teaching, research, excellence, and outreach can only be fully realized when we build and maintain a working and learning environment that is characterized by equity, diversity, inclusion, engagement, and belonging.

Our university is made richer by diversity of identities, thought, culture, and experiences. The more we can do to find and support colleagues who are different from ourselves, the more we will grow as individuals and as a community. We will have more opportunities to discover new ideas, and we will be able to cultivate working and learning environments where everyone can flourish.

Our minds create convenient patterns for a sense of safety and certainty. Unconscious Bias was first uncovered and researched in the 1980s, and since then, that research has been built and shared by many. Sharing that research is part of what we are committed to here at UW–Madison.

The information in this video is an invitation to be self-reflective and to work with others to recognize and mitigate unconscious bias. When we do this, we can create new possibilities, and build more equitable, diverse, inclusive, and successful working and learning environments for all. On, Wisconsin!

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Introduction

To conduct equitable recruitment at UW-Madison, one must understand unconscious bias and why it occurs. A fair hiring practice is intentional in its effort to recognize unconscious bias and devotes time and energy to managing unconscious bias.

The Office of Human Resources at UW-Madison produced the video “Hiring the best and brightest: Understanding unconscious bias and improving our hiring practices and decisions”. The video includes information about unconscious bias in the hiring process, how unconscious bias relates to decision-making, and how we can control unconscious bias.

This guidebook is a supplemental material for self-learners, trainers, or facilitators to learn or facilitate an unconscious bias course. The guidebook includes key definitions, an introduction to unconscious bias, strategies to recognize and control unconscious bias, example scenarios, and activities. The purpose of this video and guidebook is to help faculty and staff understand and recognize individual unconscious bias, particularly as it pertains to the recruitment process, so that we may improve hiring practices and processes at UW-Madison.

Learning Objectives

- Acknowledge that bias is inherent
- Articulate how bias influences outcomes
- Commit to creating fair, unbiased processes

Audience

- Search and screen committees
- Hiring managers
- Others who have contact with candidates and/or applicant materials

Key Definitions

- **Bias** is a preference or choice in favor of, or against, something or someone, usually in a way consider to be unfair, unjust, or inequitable.
- **Culture:** A set of unspoken rules that shape a group’s values, norms, beliefs, habits, patterns of thinking, behaviors and styles of communication.
- **Diversity** is the range of human qualities that impact and influence how people are perceived and how they behave. These qualities include but are not limited to age, gender, race, ethnicity, physical and mental abilities, sexual orientation, marital status, geography, location, spirituality, education, values and beliefs, etc.
- **Inclusion** refers to a sense of belonging: feeling respected, valued, and seen for who you are and valued as a contributing member of the team, work group, or organization. It is providing access to the organization and creating opportunities for people to be part of the fundamental fabric of the way the organization functions—decision-making, responsibility, leadership—and then creating organizations that are culturally competent, culturally intelligent, and culturally flexible.

- Microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities—whether intentional or unintentional—that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults to the target person or group.
- Unconscious Bias or implicit bias refers to unintentional bias in judgments or actions that result from mental processes that occur below the level of our conscious awareness. It arises from our brain's ability to automatically categorize information and on associations, we have learned from our society and culture.
 - Types of unconscious bias
 - **Anchoring Bias** is over-relying on the first piece of information obtained and using it as the baseline for comparison. For example, **if** the first applicant has an unusually high test score, the screener might use that applicant's score as an anchor for reviewing the others.
 - **Confirmation bias** involves favoring information that confirms previously existing beliefs or biases. For example, **a hiring manger** prefers hiring candidates who have graduated from a specific college or university.
 - **Halo effect** is the tendency to judge others similarly on all traits, assuming that because someone is good or bad at one thing they will be equally good or bad at another. For example, **during a search**, if a candidate has strong educational credentials the committee might conclude that they are also a strong leader.
 - **In-group bias** can make us so much more comfortable with those who we unconsciously feel are like us and in our group. For example, **search committee members** who perceive commonalities with applicants are more likely to view them favorably.
 - **Stereotype bias** is attributing assumed or learned characteristics of a group to individual members of the group, whether they share the characteristic. For example, a search committee member judges a job candidate by their physical appearance (e.g., race, gender, age, physical traits, etc.)

What is Bias?

Our biases impact our decision making, sometimes without us even knowing. Bias in hiring practices – whether it is conscious, unconscious, or implicit – is favoring one person or group over another person or group for reasons unrelated to the actual job criteria. Research shows that implicit and unconscious bias significantly impacts everything from evaluating resumes to phone interviews to in-person interview processes. Understanding the types and impact of bias is one strategy to better prevent its impact on hiring decisions.

What is Unconscious Bias?

Unconscious bias is a mental shortcut, an automatic part of thinking that saves time and allows quick decisions. Different than conscious or explicit bias – which are often known preferences, implicit or unconscious bias results from almost automatic connections or decisions we make often without conscious consideration.

Conscious or explicit bias: Known preferences that are expressed when offered a choice.

Unconscious or implicit bias: Automatic connections or decisions made without conscious consideration. Sometimes these processes are based on previous experience or stereotypes common in our society.

For example, from early childhood we quickly discover that some things are similar and that making conclusions about those things seems to be reliable. We naturally recognize and apply patterns without having to think about it. Like figure 1, when an individual sees a subject, people will naturally identify which subject does not belong to the group.

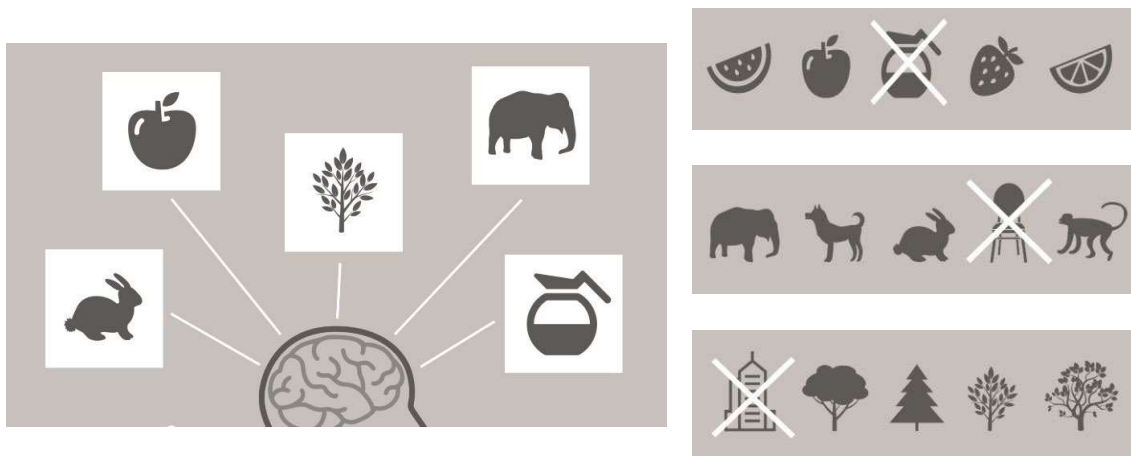


Figure 1. Group subjects

This way of thinking becomes so natural to us that we no longer notice it. We learn that we can make decisions, difficult or simple, by relying on the patterns we have formed, and base decisions on choices made in the past. Patterns are often connected with norms and behavioral traits learned through our lives.

Activity 1

Please identify which columns are associated to male characteristics or female characteristics.

COLUMN 1	COLUMN 2
Independent Assertive Intelligent Analytical Willing to take risks	Sympathetic Loyal Compassionate Gentle Relationship Builder

Historically, leaders have been associated with values in column 1. These same values are associated with our stereotypes about men. The historical association of leaders with stereotypically male traits (column 1) causes bias against female leaders' traits even though we recognize that great leaders today exhibit traits from both columns. These patterns result in implicit bias.

Unconscious/Implicit Bias

Our positive attitude about a particular thing or person can transfer very easily to other things, people, and groups that share attributes with the original person or thing.

This transference can occur without conscious awareness. For example, on a research study, people demonstrate a biased preference for new products that resemble their own names (Brendl, Chattopadhyay, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2005).

When a pattern works for us, we feel a rewarding sense of certainty. This is an actual chemical aspect of the brain. Being certain releases a feel-good chemical like serotonin while being uncertain releases a chemical like cortisol, which does not feel good (see figure 2).



Figure 2. Serotonin and cortisol as key regulators of unconscious bias

A substantial body of evidence demonstrates that most people hold unconscious biases about groups of people. Unconscious biases can also be referred to as schemas, stereotypes, mental models, cognitive shortcuts, statistical discrimination, implicit associations, spontaneous trait inference, system 1 thinking (i.e., an automatic, fast, and often unconscious way of thinking). Unconscious bias is a natural aspect of how our brains work but can lead to choices that negatively affect our hiring decisions. When conducting recruitment, it can result in hiring someone who may not be the most qualified candidate. In addition to harming individual people, these biases have consequences for the university.

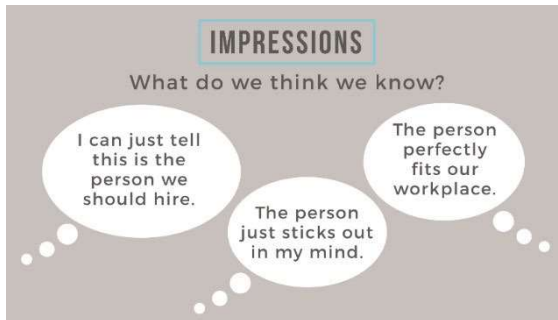
Diversity adds richness to our UW-Madison community and without diverse perspectives people bring, we limit our creativity, problem-solving capacity, and opportunities for innovative thinking. Further, organizations across the nation are legally and financially exposed to the consequences of unconscious bias. Moreover, costs can be measured in the effort needed to recover and repair situations that result from unconscious bias. The cost of replacing an employee can be more than the departing employee's salary.

Consequences of unconscious bias

- Limited creativity, problem-solving capacity, and innovative thinking
- Employee turnover (and the time it takes to hire someone new)
- Committee member, department, and university reputation
- Credibility

- Recovery from illegal questions or answers
- Reduce morale and productivity
- Legal liability

Recognize Unconscious Bias



Before we can begin to manage unconscious bias, we need to be able to recognize it when it occurs. In a hiring situation, we are likely to think we know aspects of an applicant that are the results of unconscious bias. Some common things we think we know are impressions rather than evidence.

Impressions, not evidence

Our impressions of an applicant are the result of our mind concluding something based on patterns from our experiences. These impressions begin to form early in the recruitment process. The ability of the unconscious to make patterns extends to screening resumes, cover letters, and during interviews and meetings with candidates. By the nature of the brain, certain assumptions often occur in seconds.

Here are some things to consider:

- Men and women who looked more stereotypically masculine were more likely to be hired for leadership positions.
- Older workers are stereotyped as being resistant to change, difficult to train, and having physical limitations, so younger candidates (despite their inexperience) are given preference in hiring.
- The resumes in figure 3 are identical. Hiring bias was found by resumes bearing names traditionally held by non white-sounding names.



Figure 3. Identical resume with different names

These assumptions result in potentially unfair judgment and bias. These assumptions are also self-reinforcing because they bring attention to the attributes of a person that fits the assumptions and overlook the ones that set them apart. In addition, at the same time it will feel good, because we experience this as being certain.

A fair and equitable hiring decision should be challenging and take time to accomplish. In the hiring process, an amount of uncertainty is a good sign. Another way to keep this awareness is to consider the old adage about “things that are too good to be true.” One way to address these issues is to discuss the evaluation criteria with the search committee prior to evaluating applicant materials or interviews.

Consider:

- What would [a skill] look like on a resume or curriculum vitae?
- What would be evidence of...?
- What are our benchmarks for criteria or interview questions?
- How will we monitor our process for managing against unconscious bias?

Examples:

- Are you consistently relying on the criteria (qualifications) developed for the position?
- Have the accomplishments, ideas, and findings of women or minority applicants or traditionally underrepresented groups been undervalued?
- Are negative assumptions about whether women, minority, or traditionally underrepresented applicants will “fit in” to the existing environment influencing the evaluation?
- Did you avoid evaluating applicants based on promise or potential rather than on evidence of accomplishments and productivity?

To explore your own unconscious assumptions there is an excellent resource called Project Implicit (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html>) that has a variety of tests you can take online.

Control for Unconscious Bias

From an organizational standpoint, we are developing policies and providing training that helps to manage unconscious bias. We can also work to manage unconscious bias as individuals.

Consider these four principles about bias:

- Bias is universal
- Bias is most difficult to manage in the moment of decision
- Managing bias is intentional not instinctual
- Managing bias is most successful with others rather than alone

Look at your own habits of decision-making and be aware of situations that may encourage unconscious bias. One way to look at your habits is to consider the SEEDS model of situations where there is a

tendency to fall back on instinctive choices. The Neuro Leadership Institute created this model and provides suggestions for managing these tendencies (see table 2).

Table 2 The Neuro Leadership Institute SEEDSTM Model

SEEDS™ model	Common forms	Actions
Similarity “People like me are better than others”	In all people decisions	Focus on shared goals and focus on similarities
Expedience “If it feels familiar and easy it must be true”	When we hurry or experience high cognitive load	Break process into steps and create processes to consider all information
Experience “My perceptions are accurate”	In decisions and often happen because of subjective perceptions	Get other perspectives and revisit ideas after a break
Distance: “Closer is better than distant”	When making decisions where you feel closer to the subject	Decide in another time frame
Safety Avoid immediate comfort	Guard against immediately identifying different as unsafe or risky	Think long-term benefits

The NeuroLeadership Institute also suggests three research-based strategies for controlling unconscious bias in processes:

- Use if-then plans – identify decision process that begin to make positive responses automatic in every hiring process (i.e., if I see a candidate with a disability, then I should focus on the candidate’ abilities or skills rather than the disabilities)
- Create decision guides – step-by-step protocols for making key hiring decisions
- Implement preventative measures – work to keep biases from being activated (i.e., remover distinguishing features from resume or curriculum vitae, group hiring, or designate a “chief contrarian”)

Activity 2

1. Write down your if-then-plans to identify your decision process.
2. Are there any hiring decision guides or protocols in your department or unit? Write down your hiring decision guides or protocols.
3. Write down three strategies of preventative measures for the hiring decisions making.

The Women in Science and Engineering Leadership Institute (referred to as WISELI) at UW-Madison, which was created to study gender equity, implement solutions, and provide methods to measure and analyze data, provides the following recommendations for minimizing the influence of bias when reviewing applicants:

Mitigate bias strategies:

- 1) If-then plan,
- 2) Decision guides,
- 3) Preventative measures,
- 4) Diversify applicant pool and review panel,
- 5) Acknowledge the role of bias,
- 6) Agree on selection criteria,
- 7) Focus on "Required" criteria,
- 8) Evaluate all materials,
- 9) Defend decisions, and
- 10) Review your own bias.

- Replace your self-image as an objective person with recognition and acceptance that you are subject to the influence of bias and assumptions
- Strive to increase the diversity of your search committee
- Strive to increase the representation of women and minority scholars in your applicant pool
- Develop well-defined evaluation criteria prior to reviewing applications
- Prioritize evaluation criteria prior to evaluating applicants
- Engage in counter-stereotype imaging to reduce the influence of unconscious assumptions (i.e., imagine an astronaut, engineer, CEO who is also a woman OR specific positive counter-stereotypical individuals you know)
- Spend sufficient time evaluating each applicant and minimize distractions
- Focus on each applicant as an individual and evaluate their entire application package by focusing on individuals' qualifications rather than on our assumptions about characteristics of the groups to which they belong
- Rely upon inclusion rather than exclusion strategies in making selection decisions
- Stop periodically to evaluate your criteria and their application

In addition, the mind rewards decisions that match patterns so let the sense of certainty alert you to unconscious bias. As an individual seeking to manage unconscious bias, take the time to follow the hiring procedures and guidelines provided to you by your organization.

Note: Talk with your human resources representatives if you have concerns.

Search and Screen Scenario

- Chair: I want to thank you all for serving in our search and screen committee. These are the final interview results.
- Panel member #1: I can't believe how many applicants we had for this position. Are you sure these are the last ones?
- Chair: Yes, these are the last ones. Based on the final feedback these five candidates are all highly qualified for the position.
- Panel member #1: That's great news. It felt like to me like we weren't going to find anyone that would fit the job.
- Panel member #3: That's surprising!
- Panel member #2: Huh, why do you say that?
- Panel member #1: Well, no reason in particular really. The people I interviewed... I just couldn't see them in the job.
- Panel member #2: That's interesting. Do you have any idea why you felt that way?

- Panel member #1: Um, no, not really. It was just an overall impression. You know, everyone gave good answers but I just felt like I couldn't connect with them. I don't know why I didn't like them. It seemed like what they said sounded good but the words didn't seem to fit the person.
- Chair: We must only evaluate individuals based on the job description criteria that we discussed with our HR representative before we started the interview process; we can't consider other factors when making a hiring decision.
- Panel member #1: Huh. Well, I still feel confident in my sense to read people, I think I'm a pretty good judge of character.
- Panel member #2: So you're going to stick with that gut feeling then?
- Panel member #1: Yup! I mean, I just don't see how that's a bad thing.
- Panel Member #3: Hey guys. Have you ever heard the term "Unconscious Bias"?
- Panel member #2: Oh yes, I've heard about that.
- Panel member #1: Huh, that's a new one to me.
- Panel Member #3: Yeah, it's getting more recognition and there's actually a lot you can do about it. Making people aware of unconscious bias is an important first step, but learning that most people are actively trying to minimize bias is even more important. The more we get the word out, the better we can keep ourselves in check and prevent unconscious bias from influencing our hiring decisions.

Activity 3

1. What assumptions/unconscious bias are revealed in the case above?
2. How do you prevent search committee members from unconscious bias?
3. What strategies would you recommend to search committee members for minimizing unconscious bias?

Key Takeaways

What should the audience know? Do differently?

- Understand the impact of their behaviors on personnel decision making and impact on assessment process and selection and candidate's perception of UW
- Understand that they represent their department and UW
- Pause: think and consider, road bumps, A [Symbol] B [Symbol] C consequence
- Understand how it applies to entire life cycle and how concepts connect/integrate
- Unconscious bias's influence on recruiting (passing jobs through unofficial contacts)
- Fair and non-discriminatory
- Know what to focus on ("add to diversity program")
- Works, but consider things like last names and how they can throw you off
- Know data and research behind unconscious bias and diversity
- Areas on which to focus and which elements are not appropriate (height, weight, accent)
- Focus on "best qualified" to avoid distractions
- Creating questions in advance: interview prep
- Evidence of "ideal"
- Equalize
- Resources/recommended reading/case studies
- Checking references

Takeaway questions

- How does it look if I am committed to hiring without unconscious bias?
- What do I think I know about an applicant?
- What habits do I need to break?

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