



RESEARCH REQUEST

**Unconscious Bias Data Points:
Definition, Effects, and Ways to
Address It**

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Introduction

Companies devote considerable resources to eliminate overt bias from the workplace. Overt and illegal discrimination are considered rare occurrences in today's human resource practices. Yet, many of the very biases companies try to eliminate unconsciously continue to seep into decisions concerning recruitment, hiring, promotion, and performance reviews. Such judgments do not happen in an openly hostile way, but in a more subtle, nuanced and unconscious manner.

Unconscious biases can mislead managers and supervisors into making inaccurate judgments, which can have a detrimental effect on employees, particularly women, people of color, employees with disabilities, LGBT employees, and employees representing all of the other dimensions of difference.¹

Until very recently, the unfairness resulting from unconscious bias has been considered a nuisance, perhaps even a minor concern, because unlike overt bias it is difficult to document and can be hard to be believed. While challenging to record, the effects of unconscious biases are very real.

This report provides bulleted data points about unconscious biases—what they are, descriptions and examples of some behaviors that reflect them, and the effects they have on the workplace. And because recognizing and addressing unconscious biases is a skill that can be learned, this report offers some suggestions to begin recognizing and reducing them.

What is unconscious bias?

- Unconscious bias is one reason discrimination in recruitment, hiring, promotion, and other workplace practices continues to exist, even though discriminatory practices are prohibited by most companies and opposed by most people..²

- Everyone has unconscious biases; it's only human. Not all unconscious biases are bad or wrong. They are the result of the automatic decision-making that social scientists believe is a holdover from the "fight or flight" reflex that helped early humans to survive.³

- According to several studies, people are exposed to as many as 11 million pieces of information daily, but they can only process about 40 at any one time. Hidden biases act as mental shortcuts that enable faster decision-making.⁴

- Most decisions are made emotionally, instead of rationally, as most people would like to believe. Once made, people tend to collect or generate facts to support those decisions. According to diversity consultant Howard Ross, in a Diversity Best Practices paper, these biases reflect patterns of belief that are so strong and deeply ingrained, it is difficult to understand their impact on decision-making. He writes, “Ultimately, we believe our decisions are consistent with our conscious beliefs, when in fact, our unconscious is running the show.”^{5 6}

- Individuals are not the only ones who exhibit unconscious behavior; organizations do, too, which explains why efforts to create inclusive corporate cultures are frustratingly slow.⁷

- MIT professor Mary Rowe explains that unconscious biases are revealed through micro-inequities, the small, seemingly insignificant behaviors that have a corrosive effect on the workplace and professional relationships. She defines micro-inequities as “apparently small events which are often ephemeral and hard-to-prove, events which are covert, often unintentional, frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator, which occur whenever people are perceived to be ‘different.’”⁸

- Micro-inequities are those subtle unconscious behaviors that discourage and devalue others who are considered different (in some way) or out of favor. Some examples of micro-inequities that affect people from underrepresented groups include:
 - Being left off a list
 - Not being introduced at a meeting, or receiving a perfunctory introduction in comparison to the introductions of others
 - Consistently being mistaken for someone else of the same race or ethnicity
 - Distributing invitations that are uncomfortable for LGBT employees, women, non-Christians, or pose challenges for employees with disabilities (e.g. “Feel free to bring your wife”; “A belly dancer will provide the entertainment”; or “Join us as we celebrate Christmas”)
 - Avoiding eye contact or rolling of the eyes
 - Cutting down ideas before they can be considered, or giving greater weight to the same idea presented by another
 - Repeatedly misspelling or mispronouncing a name
 - Changing voice pitch, volume, tone, or inflection only when talking to that person, in ways that are not done with others

- Forced or masked smiles
- Continuing a conversation without acknowledging the presence of the “outsider”
- Focusing attention elsewhere, such as a smart phone, when in conversation.
- Using sarcasm
- Hovering over someone in a controlling manner^{9 10 11}

Impact of micro-inequities on the work place

- Micro-inequities affect employee engagement. They also directly hit a company’s bottom line. According to the Corporate Leavers study, more than 2 million professionals and managers voluntarily resign from their jobs because of micro-inequities or the snowballing effect of slights, and the perception of unfairness in the workplace.¹²

- Recruiting, retaining, and promoting employees are important issues for employee engagement, and engagement is an issue that impacts the bottom line. One study found that companies with higher engagement outperformed companies that did not. The companies with highest engagement had:
 - 160 percent higher earnings-per-share growth
 - 100 percent more in return on assets
 - 150 percent higher revenue growth
 - 40 percent more profitability
 - 78 percent higher productivity¹³

- Several studies report on the cost of replacing employees who depart. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) report, *Retaining Talent*, states, “Employee departures cost a company time, money, and other resources. Research suggests that direct replacement costs can reach as high as 50 percent – 60 percent of an employee’s annual salary, with total costs associated with turnover ranging from 90 percent to 200 percent of annual salary.”¹⁴ The Corporate Leavers Study estimates the cost of replacing employees who leave because of workplace unfairness at \$64 million annually.¹⁵

- The Corporate Leavers Study reports,
 - People of color are three times more likely than White men or White women to say workplace unfairness was the primary reason for their resignations.
 - Gay and lesbian professionals and managers are twice as likely as heterosexual White men to say workplace unfairness was the reason they quit their positions.

- Specific types of unfairness that prompted the most resignations were: (1) being asked to attend extra recruiting or community related events because of one’s race, gender, religion or sexual orientation, (2) being passed over for a promotion due to one’s personal characteristics, (3) being publicly humiliated and (4) being compared to a terrorist in a joking or serious manner.
 - About 27 percent of employees who experience unfairness at work tend to discourage job applicants from applying for positions with their employers. Similarly, 13 percent of these same respondents said their experience strongly discouraged them from recommending their employer’s products or services to others.¹⁶
- In a *New York Times* interview, Ori Brafman, author of *Overcoming the ‘Sway’ in Professional Life*, said, “Time and again, research shows that interviews were poor predictors of job performance because we tend to hire people we think are similar to us rather than those who are objectively going to do a good job.”¹⁷
 - Here’s an example of how unconscious decisions can affect recruitment decisions. Researchers at MIT and the University of Chicago (UofC) distributed resumes to 1,250 employers who were advertising openings and had indicated that they were aggressively seeking diversity. Some resumes had names more common among Blacks, others had names more commonly found among Whites. The resumes were further broken into two groups—average or highly skilled. The results? Resumes with names more common among Whites received 50 percent more callbacks than those with names more common among Blacks. Average resumes with names more common among Whites received more interviews than highly skilled resumes with names more common among Blacks.¹⁸
 - Here’s another example of how unconscious biases play out in the workplace. More than 85 percent of American men are shorter than six feet tall. Yet nearly 60 percent of corporate CEOs are over six feet tall. Less than 4 percent of American men are more than six feet two inches tall. Again, more than 36 percent of CEOs are more than six feet two inches tall. The same patterns are seen in military generals, admirals, and U.S. presidents. According to studies, an inch of height is worth about \$790 per year in salary.¹⁹ Few boards of directors consciously seek out above-average-height CEOs, but that’s who is more likely to be hired.
 - Unconscious bias has legal ramifications. According to employment attorney Shalanda Ballard, it is increasingly being used to prove discrimination in employment lawsuits.

Unconscious bias was an issue in the *Dukes v. Walmart Stores*, and in other well-publicized class action lawsuits against Home Depot, FedEx, Best Buy, American Express, Morgan Stanley, and others.

Suggestions to address micro-inequities and unfairness in workplace

- Because everyone has biases of one form or another, our brains can make decisions that we consciously find offensive. Becoming aware of these biases and consciously changing behaviors can help mitigate the effect of biases in the workplace.²⁰
- Tim Wise, a writer on diversity issues and an activist, said that people avoid talking about race because they don't want to feel like a bad person or they don't want to accept responsibility for societal wrongs, especially when they don't feel that they have done anything wrong. Talking about race is not easy.²¹
- Company leaders can begin the process of recognizing and addressing unconscious bias—individually and organizationally—by taking several steps, including,
 - Recognize that everyone has unconscious biases. Negative intent is not always the reason behind acts of unfairness or micro-inequities. Sometimes it reflects an unawareness of how a behavior affects others.
 - Become aware of and identify those biases
 - Dissect the biases—understand how and why they formed
 - Decide to tackle specific biases and look for common interest groups to help do so²²
- MIT professor Mary Rowe advocates the use of micro-affirmations to counter micro-inequities. She defines micro-affirmations as “apparently small acts, which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur wherever people wish to help others succeed.”²³
- Rowe and others offer behaviors that individuals can perform that can open doors of opportunity and serve as micro-affirmations. These include:
 - Offer gestures of inclusion and caring
 - Consistently give credit to others
 - Exhibit graceful acts of listening
 - Greet people with sincerity and ensure a warm and upbeat tone of voice
 - Make eye contact, smile, and use people's names

- Respond to what is being said by paraphrasing
 - Connect person-to-person with others; acknowledge employees by getting to know them beyond their job or role
 - Make sure that your body language communicates active listening when others speak
 - Draw others in by drawing them out—ask questions and invite input^{24 25}
- Howard Ross, in the Diversity Best Practices articles, offers suggestions for organizations to help uncover and reduce instances of unconscious bias, including:
 - Review every aspect of the employment lifecycle for hidden bias—screening resumes, interviews, assignment process, mentoring programs, performance evaluations, identification of high performers, promotion, and termination
 - Refocus the conversation away from underrepresented groups of employees to a focus on fair treatment and respect for everyone
 - Conduct anonymous employee surveys that include questions targeting bias and unfair treatment
 - Ask former employees (through anonymous surveys or other means) about any issues they faced while employed at the company; what steps, if any, could be taken for their return; how they describe the work environment to potential job applicants; and how they talk about the company’s products and services with prospective customers
 - Offer an anonymous observation channel (possibly third-party ombudsman) for employees to report instances of bias or unfair treatment. Keep in mind that many instances of unconscious bias are subtle and not covered by current laws
 - Conduct an internal or industry-wide resume study, similar to the one by MIT and the University of Chicago, to see how resumes with equivalent education and experience are treated based on names that are gender, race, or culturally distinct.
 - Offer training that specifically addresses unconscious biases and micro-inequities in the workplace.²⁶

Conclusion

In his book, *Blink*, author Malcolm Gladwell wrote, “Our unconscious is a powerful force.” He also explained that snap judgments, first impressions, and yes, even unconscious biases “can be educated and controlled.” Connecting Gladwell’s assertion about the power of the unconscious with Wise’s view that few people like talking about the sensitive subject of race, bias, or unfair

treatment, results in a better understanding of what’s happening in companies of all sizes. Micro-inequities, unfairness, and unconscious biases rob organizations of the talent and skills from engaged employees. Such treatment can cost companies money when disaffected employees leave. To tackle the unconscious biases that everyone holds, it is crucial to understand the difference between guilt and responsibility. Wise explained, “Guilt is what you feel because of the stuff you did, and responsibility is what you take because of the kind of person that you are.”²⁷

Endnotes

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