



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

RECRUITMENT TOOLKIT

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Avoiding Unconscious Bias



Welcome

Welcome to the School's guide on **Avoiding Unconscious Bias**. This document builds on the School's *Recruitment and Selection Policy and Procedure (Professional Services Salaried Staff)* and provides further practical guidance to help hiring managers across the School conduct their shortlisting.

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1 Unconscious bias

Unconscious bias can influence decisions throughout the employee lifecycle, including recruitment, promotion and performance management.

1.1 What is unconscious bias?

Unconscious bias occurs when individuals favour others who look like them and/or share their values. For example a person may be drawn to someone with a similar educational background, from the same area, or who is the same ethnicity as them.

EXAMPLES:

A manager who was not successful at school may listen to, or be supportive of, an employee who left school without qualifications because, subconsciously, they are reminded of their younger self. The same can be true of a manager who is educated to degree level, favouring employees who have also been to university. This is known as affinity bias, because they feel an affinity with the person as they have similar life experiences.

Another form of unconscious bias is known as the halo effect. This is where a positive trait is transferred onto a person without anything really being known about that person.

For example, those who dress conservatively are often seen as more capable in an office environment, based purely on their attire.

Everyone has unconscious biases. The brain receives information all the time from our own experiences and what we read, hear or see in the media and from others. The brain uses shortcuts to speed up decision making and unconscious bias is a by-product. There are times when this sort of quick decision making is useful, for example if faced with a dangerous situation, however it is not a good way to make decisions when dealing with recruiting or promoting staff.

1.2 Key points

- It's natural.
- It's unintended.
- It can affect decisions.
- It can be mitigated.

Where unconscious bias is against a protected characteristic, it can be discriminatory. For example if during a recruitment process a recruiting manager ignores the skills and experience of a candidate who is a different race than them and appoints another candidate who is the same race, this could be discriminatory.

Conscious thoughts are controlled and well-reasoned. Unconscious thoughts can be based on stereotypes and prejudices that we may not even realise we have. Stereotypes surrounding tattoos may subconsciously suggest a person is unlikely to conform and follow rules. Stereotypes surrounding mothers may lead to unconscious bias against women who apply for a role which involves regular travel away from home.

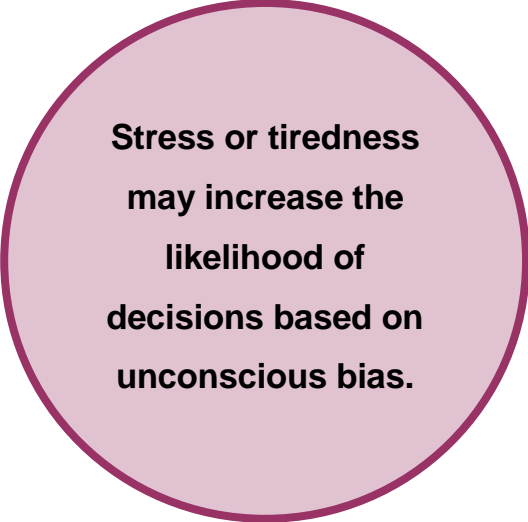
“Everyone has unconscious biases.”

2 Avoiding unconscious bias in the shortlisting process

Once we accept that we all naturally use subconscious mental shortcuts, we can take time to consider and reflect on whether such automatic thought processes are inappropriately affecting our objective decision-making.

2.1 How to reduce unconscious bias

- **Avoid undertaking the shortlisting process by yourself.** We recommend shortlisting with a panel of colleagues individually, and submitting responses through the e-Recruitment systems where the Chair will confirm a final shortlist.
- **Each panel member should produce a shortlist independently using only the person specification and assessing candidates against the essential and desirable criteria.** Members of the panel may wish to meet to discuss their selection prior to making any final decisions on who should be invited for interview.
- **Try not to compare one candidate against another.** You should assess candidates against the set criteria; not making comparisons between applicants, as this is where a bias can influence your decisions.
- **Do not let other aspects of the application influence your decision.** For example, making assumptions based on things such as gaps in employment or placing more emphasis on a degree awarded by a Russell Group University.
- **Do not rush decisions,** allow sufficient time to shortlist. Take your time and consider candidate applications properly.
- **Be able to justify decisions by evidence** and record the reasons for your decisions.
- **Try to work with a wider range of people and get to know them as individuals.** This could include working with different teams or colleagues based in a different location.
- **Focus on the positive behaviour of people and not negative stereotypes.**



**Stress or tiredness
may increase the
likelihood of
decisions based on
unconscious bias.**

2.2 Unconscious bias and the Equality Act 2010

Examples of how unconscious bias can influence decisions and lead to unequal and unlawful treatment i.e. under the Equality Act 2010:

- An assumption that women would not have sufficient physical strength to perform a heavy job would not be true of all women.
- An assumption that a pregnant applicant will want to work flexible hours or will have a poor attendance record if appointed.
- An assumption that a female applicant who has young children would be unable or unwilling to work long hours or attend international or overnight conferences.
- An assumption that an applicant from a particular country or cultural background would not "fit in" to the team.
- A stereotypical view that older people are less productive than younger people or that their mental faculties automatically decline with age.
- An assumption that making reasonable adjustments for a disabled applicant would be too costly or overly disruptive.

If an applicant has a disability like dyslexia or a learning disability, judging the applicant on the basis of a poorly presented application form could be discriminatory and unlawful. While excellent written communication skills may be an essential requirement for certain jobs and professions, evidence of spelling errors or a poor communication style should not be used to draw negative conclusions where such skills are not relevant to the job.

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