

Bias checking in remote work

“ Unconscious bias can impact career evolution and promotions, potentially leading to unequal opportunities: this is especially true for disadvantaged groups.



Introduction

Remote and hybrid work (HRW) arrangements offer flexibility and opportunities for wider talent pools, but they also risk amplifying existing biases or creating new forms of exclusion.

Because of the unconscious bias we all have, it is possible to discriminate or exclude without even meaning to or realising it. This factsheet provides practical guidance for identifying and preventing bias in HRW settings.

Understanding unconscious bias



Definition

Unconscious bias refers to the automatic, mental shortcuts used to process information and make decisions quickly. These biases are shaped by personal experiences, societal stereotypes, and cultural norms and operate below the level of conscious awareness. They appear in all areas of life, from interpersonal relationships to legal decisions or in the medical and health sector. Hence, it is not surprising that they should also appear in work environments, whether on-site or remote.

Types of unconscious bias

According to Savard et al. (2022), unconscious bias operates at different levels:

- **On an individual level**, stemming from one's beliefs system, stereotypes, blind spots...
- **On a social level**, based on the sense of belonging to a specific group (pertaining to gender, race, political beliefs, sports interests...).
- **On a systemic level**, rooted in oppressions and privileges dynamics. Sexist, racist, heteronormative, ableist bias operate on this level.

There is a multitude of unconscious biases, and it is not possible to list them all. Some, however, are easier to pick up on and to mitigate.

- 1 The affinity bias leads us to prefer those who are similar to ourselves in terms of interests, backgrounds, or experiences.
- 2 The confirmation bias means focusing on information that confirms existing beliefs and ignoring contradictory evidence.
- 3 The proximity bias can be prevalent in HRW, when employees who work more often on-site are often perceived as more committed or productive, even when performance metrics suggest otherwise.

Impact of unconscious bias

Unconscious bias plays a role in decision-making, from **the recruitment process**, where the affinity bias may come into play and affect hiring decisions, to **performance evaluations**, where the confirmation bias may lead a manager to overlook an employee's achievement because they are seen as not reliable, etc... Hence, **unconscious bias can impact career evolution and promotions, potentially leading to unequal opportunities: this is especially true for disadvantaged groups.**

As they are strongly linked to oppression and privilege dynamics in the workplace, bias can result in the marginalisation of certain team members, reducing their chances to contribute fully, hence negatively impacting team dynamics. For examples, if an employee has an accent because their work language is not their mother tongue, **their input may be undervalued or seen as less relevant.**

Bias-checking practices for managers and HR

- ☒ **Audit your decisions**
Periodically review decisions related to hiring, feedback, promotions, and project assignments. Ask: are remote and hybrid employees represented fairly? do evaluation criteria disproportionately benefit those who are more visible or vocal?
- ☒ **Standardise performance metrics**
Use clear, role-based, and outcome-driven criteria that apply regardless of where someone works. Focus on deliverables, not hours online or perceived enthusiasm in meetings.
- ☒ **Diversify feedback channels**
Gather performance input from multiple sources (peers, clients, team members) to minimise individual bias
- ☒ **Bias awareness training**
Provide regular, role-specific training for managers on how bias manifests in hybrid environments and how to counteract it during recruitment, evaluations, and everyday interactions.

Conclusion

Addressing and fostering awareness of employees' unconscious bias is not an easy task. Admitting we are biased is often difficult and uncomfortable, and feelings of guilt and shame are common. To mitigate these feelings, it is paramount to have structured and pedagogical training tools. The goal is not to antagonise or blame anyone, but to help them understand how these biases impact communication and relationships. This is a necessary step to then build on strategies to mitigate the negative impact of unconscious bias.



References

- Savard, Benoit, Brière, Sophie, Pulido, Bibiana, Keyser-Verreault, Amélie, Auclair, Isabelle, Laplanche, Laurie, St-Georges, Jade and Stockless, Alain. Biais inconscients et comportements inclusifs dans les organisations, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2022. <https://www.pulaval.com/livres/biais-inconscients-et-comportements-inclusifs-dans-les-organisations>

Further reading

- The Harvard Implicit Association Test
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>