CDC
Investment works

Tackling unconscious bias
Practical tips for reducing bias in people assessment meetings

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1. Set your assessment meeting up for success
2. Limit the influence of bias by keeping it front-of-mind
3. Different types of bias – what to watch for

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1) Set your assessment meeting up for success

Bias is more likely to occur where your meeting structure leads to participants who are:

✚ **Under time pressure:** having a huge number of people to consider can lead to insufficient time to discuss each individual properly. When you're under pressure to reach a quick conclusion, biases can override more reasoned thinking.

- Take care when you draw up the agenda of your meeting, and don't be over-optimistic about what you can cover. Make sure you've allowed enough time per candidate.

✚ **Tired:** overlong meetings with insufficient breaks lead to mental and physical fatigue.

- Resist the temptation to work through breaks. Make sure participants use breaks to get up and walk around. Be ready to end the meeting when energy levels are low.

✚ **Doing too many things at once:** Participants who are also working on their laptop or phone are not giving their full attention to the discussion.

- As with any meeting, you should ask people to close their laptop and put their phone away before the discussion starts. Those participants who know they will have to take an urgent, unavoidable call should warn the meeting chair at the start and take the call outside.

2) Limit the influence of bias by keeping it front-of-mind

Research on the subject shows that it's helpful to **remind people about the potential for bias** and to **describe the different types of bias** at the start of a meeting (for example, using the list below). It's a way of priming your brain to watch for it.

At the start of meetings in which you will be making decisions about people, spend the first 10-15 minutes of your agenda reminding participants of the key points in this document.

Check as you go through your meeting to make sure you're being fair, focusing on consistent performance criteria and constructively challenging each other in discussions.

> *How to limit this bias:* don't be afraid to call each other out if you think you see bias creeping in.

3) Different types of bias – what to watch for

1. Affinity bias: a natural preference for those similar or familiar to us. Lack of recent, specific, feedback increases the use of overall impressions and creates an opportunity for affinity bias.

> *How to limit this bias:* recognise and appreciate the value of difference, even when it is uncomfortable.

2. Agentic stereotypes and a preference for extraversion: this is when we assess a behaviour differently depending on whether a man or woman displays it (in other words, it's considered positive for a man to be assertive, but negative for a woman).

Diversity warning!
- **Using length of time as an informal criterion for good performance** (as well as agentic stereotypes) may perpetuate female under-representation in more senior roles - if women have taken maternity leave, for example.

- **Time and agentic bias can also impede the progress of less-represented employees** and younger employees who may be subject to different expectations or an informal bar that overrides behavioural evidence of potential.

> *How to limit this bias:* check you're describing or valuing a behaviour the same, whether viewing it in a man or a woman.

Don't undervalue those who are less extravert (especially as research shows they are more likely to be from under-represented groups).

3. Anchoring bias: this is where we allow information unrelated to the timeframe of focus to influence our perceptions of the individual.

How to limit this bias: stick to what we know about recent performance and do not continually dredge up the past or resort to historic, out-of-date evidence.

4. Attentional bias: where someone who has evoked a slightly more emotional reaction (such as frustration, relief, gratitude, etc.) often for historic interactions that happened before the current six to 12-month period, will come under greater scrutiny than others, casting an endless shadow which they struggle to shake off.

How to limit this bias: - stick to what is relevant and recent.

5. Attribution errors: where an employee's performance is attributed to someone else or to circumstances, leading to their being held less or more culpable for slow progress than another might be.

Diversity warning!
Women's success may more often be attributed to circumstances than to personal ability.

How to limit this bias: give credit and place accountability where it rightfully belongs.

6. Availability bias: the tendency to make decisions based on information most readily available to us, even if it's just memory.

*How to limit this bias: r*ely on facts and evidence, not simply on memory.

7. Confirmation bias: where we look for data points to substantiate a view we already hold, and we dismiss or downplay data which does not.

How to limit this bias: consider all the evidence, whether you like it or not.

8. Contrast effect: where people are compared with each other. This may look like calibration but can lead to differences between people being assumed to be somehow more

important than they are, or result in attempts to look for and 'clone' people with favoured traits.

Diversity warning!

- Under-represented employees (female or Black and Minority Ethnic employees) tend to fare less well when compared to majority group employees, due to associations with trust, risk and familiarity (affinity bias).

    How to limit this bias: talk about individuals and avoid comparing them (and avoid discussing groups of employees in similar roles).

8. Priming bias: sharing anecdotes or interactions about individuals effectively 'primes' the rest of the group (favourably or unfavourably), based on limited evidence.

    *How to limit this bias: s*tick to the evidence and use concrete, specific terms rather than abstract language ('They are good at x' rather than 'They are brilliant'.).