

# Tips for Rooting Out Hidden Bias

Everyone harbors unconscious prejudice. The trick is gaining enough insight to prevent it from affecting who you hire and how you treat people.

By Dana Wilkie Dec 1, 2014

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Jennifer Allyn is not someone you'd expect to embrace the notion that a woman's place is at home. She earned a master's degree from Harvard Kennedy School, served as an HR consultant to *Fortune 500* companies and is currently leading diversity efforts for [PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP](#). She sits on women's leadership boards, won a Feminist Press award and is her family's primary breadwinner.

So it stands to reason that when this accomplished professional sees the word "career," she thinks of women as often as men.

Except she doesn't.

Somewhere in her subconscious—so deeply buried that she isn't aware of it—Allyn associates women with families and men with careers. So says the assessment she took called the [Implicit Association Test](#) (IAT), a well-respected tool designed to uncover hidden biases about everything from race to gender to age.

"I was raised in a family where my father was the breadwinner and my mother was the caregiver," says Allyn, who was stunned by the IAT results. "It's a pretty good jolt when you realize that no matter what your conscious mind may think, there are other dynamics at play."

Those "other dynamics" may be biases that we embrace on an unconscious level—deep prejudices or stereotypes imparted by upbringing, culture and mass media that influence our perceptions about people and our behavior toward them.

"Hidden biases are not a sign of a bad person," says Zabeen Hirji, CHRO of the Toronto-based Royal Bank of Canada, which in 2013 co-hosted, with Ernst & Young, a forum on hidden bias for 300 corporate and community leaders. "Most people have them. Once we accepted that ... it allowed us to talk about these issues in a nonjudgmental way. What's bad is not trying to understand what your unconscious biases are."

Skin color, gender and age are generally what people think of when they consider biases, but individuals can harbor unconscious prejudice about myriad characteristics, including:

- Height and weight.
- Introversiion and extroversiion.
- Marital and parental status.
- Disability status (for example, the use of a wheelchair or cane).
- Foreign accents.
- Where someone attended college.
- Hobbies or extracurricular activities.

All of these characteristics and many others can imperceptibly influence everything from who gets interviewed to who gets hired to who gets fired. They can affect the way people are mentored, how employees socialize with one another, who is given plum assignments and promotions, and much more.

Which is why a growing number of U.S. corporations offer training programs aimed at rooting out hidden biases.

“Most of our large clients are doing some kind of unconscious-bias training, compared to five years ago—and this is happening globally,” says Margaret Regan, president and CEO of [The FutureWork Institute](#), a global diversity consultancy. “It is probably the one topic that is requested for global and U.S. training by all of our clients going into 2015.”

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*Margaret Regan, The FutureWork Institute*

Sara Taylor, a diversity expert and founder of [deepSEE Consulting](#), says unconscious-bias training is among the top three e-learning subjects requested by her clients. “More people are starting to see this as something that we’ve got to pay attention to,” she says.

## None Are Immune

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Lest you think you’re immune to having hidden biases, try taking one of the IATs at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit>. Chances are you’ll be surprised by the results.

Test participants, who click on specific letters on the keyboard to sort words into one of two categories, respond more quickly when they perceive that certain words—such as “men” and “career”—are closely related. One version, the Race IAT, reveals that 75 percent of its takers, including some black individuals, have an implicit preference for white people over black people.

Other versions show that Americans prefer thin people over fat people, heterosexuals over homosexuals, and young people over old people. Most Americans, like Allyn, tend to associate women with families and men with careers, according to some versions of the IAT.

Research by a leader in the field of hidden bias—Mahzarin R. Banaji—shows that the human brain is wired to make lightning-quick decisions that draw on one’s assumptions and experiences but that may also be based on misguided generalizations.

“People make judgments and decisions that are totally wrong,” says Anthony G. Greenwald, a University of Washington psychology professor who created the IAT in 1994. “This automatic operation of the mind can lead to behavior that produces disparate impacts—totally without any awareness or intention.”

Most recruiters, HR professionals and managers are taught to avoid behaving differently toward people based on obvious traits such as gender, race, age or disability. Harder to recognize is the disparate treatment that occurs based on subtler biases. For example, is the applicant a married man, and does that make him appear stable? Is she a single mother, and does that make her seem unreliable? Does he speak with a Southern twang, which may give the impression that he’s not terribly bright?

Hidden bias can have legal repercussions. International organizational consulting firm Human Facets asserts on its website that “unconscious bias is increasingly being used in employment litigation to prove discrimination.”

Indeed, it was a central issue in *Dukes v. Wal-Mart Stores Inc.*, in which 2 million women sued the retail giant for gender discrimination. Unconscious-bias arguments have also been used in class-action suits against Home Depot and FedEx, with the companies settling for \$87.5 million and \$53.5 million, respectively. And hidden bias has been raised in class actions against *Fortune 500* companies such as Best Buy, Johnson & Johnson, Cargill, Merrill Lynch, General Electric, American Express, MetLife and Morgan Stanley.

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## Tips for Avoiding Biased Behavior

**Increase purposeful mentoring and coaching.** Sponsor people who are not like you.

**Be proactive about recognizing people’s different capabilities,** and help prepare them to take on challenging assignments.

**Consider who might consistently feel like an outsider,** and take steps to actively address the situation.

**Establish clearly defined, measurable interview criteria** against which all candidates will be evaluated.

**Set reasonable parameters** around the nature and amount of help you will offer to special connections.

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**Attend professional affinity group meetings** and inclusiveness events to enrich your understanding of diversity.

**Evaluate your actions daily.**

**Seek out regular feedback** on your own behaviors and actions from trusted yet objective colleagues.

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## Retraining Your Brain

Recognizing the pervasive effects that hidden bias can have on the workplace, companies large and small are hiring consultants—or turning to their HR departments—to do something about it.

At the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC), Hirji embarked on hidden-bias training by having Banaji speak in May 2013 to the bank's CEO, as well as to senior managers from RBC and Ernst & Young (EY). The response was so positive that RBC and EY then hosted their hidden-bias forum with 300 Canadian leaders from corporations, academia, government and diversity advocacy groups. Today, about 1,000 RBC employees have participated in training sessions on hidden bias, which involve a mix of speakers, discussions and test-taking. The bank also has an internal social media platform that allows employees to talk about unconscious bias.

The training has had a palpable effect. Hirji tells of one executive who confessed that, after receiving training, he caught himself reflexively deciding to pick one of his male stars for a plum overseas job. "He stopped and thought about who else might be on his list, and it ended up being a woman," Hirji recalls.

Fiona Macfarlane, EY's chief inclusiveness officer for Canada, admitted that, as a South African immigrant, she tended to give other new immigrants special access and privileges because she empathized with them.

Macfarlane has developed a pamphlet for managers encouraging them to take people who appear very different from themselves to lunch or to include team members who may seem like outsiders in social events. The pamphlet notes that diverse teams perform better than homogenous ones.

In 2011, global pharmaceutical company Pfizer held a three-hour workshop on hidden bias for company leaders. Today, before managers interview job applicants, they're given a "tip sheet" that helps limit hidden bias from playing a role. Whenever possible, job interviews are conducted by a panel of diverse stakeholders.

Before PricewaterhouseCoopers managers write performance evaluations, Allyn sends them reminders to be on guard against "prototype bias" (the tendency to habitually think of the same

people for choice assignments) and “affinity bias” (the inclination to identify with employees who have interests similar to the manager’s).

Some experts suggest conducting “blind” reviews of resumes—that is, assessing resumes that have been stripped of identifying information such as name and gender—when narrowing a list of applicants. In this approach, the company creates objective scoring systems: A master’s degree might earn more points than a bachelor’s degree, for example, and points may be earned based on number of years in a relevant position. This gives managers a method for ranking resumes without knowing whether an applicant is a man or a woman, Asian or white, 25 or 45.

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## Questions to Ask Yourself

Do I typically hire the same type of person?

When I say a candidate is not the right fit, what do I mean?

What does my slate of candidates look like? Do I speak up if it is not sufficiently diverse?

Which of my past hires were successful, and what can I learn from the choices that didn’t work out?

Who do I like to assign to work on—and lead—project teams? Do I have the same go-to people all or most of the time?

Who do I take to important client or cross-team meetings?

Who do I encourage to lead or speak out at meetings? Am I creating opportunities for those less extroverted to demonstrate their capabilities?

How do I identify candidates for promotion and succession?

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## For Smaller HR Shops

While the RBCs and Pfizers of the world have the money and staff to invest in training about hidden bias, that’s not always possible for smaller companies.

Lisa Whealon is director of human resources for the GL Group, a midsize, family-owned company in St. Louis with about 200 employees that distributes and sells books to schools.

“Larger companies tend to have protocols and processes in place to limit the possibility of bias,” Whealon says. “I feel it is companies our size and smaller that really have to watch out for these biases during the recruiting and hiring process.”

She and her team assemble questions designed to reveal if an applicant’s skills and personality are suited to the company’s culture, rather than allowing managers to ask questions that might be informed by their own biases. Whealon’s queries may explore if an applicant would be comfortable around employees who wear jeans and engage in spontaneous water balloon tosses, for example, or with taking charge and making decisions without a supervisor’s approval.

The importance of this vetting process became apparent after the company discovered that one employee wasn’t working out, even though a hiring manager had insisted that the person would be a “good cultural fit.”

“We realized the manager and [employee] had many personal factors in common, such as their kids both played soccer and they had similar career backgrounds,” Whealon says. Thus, the hiring decision appeared to be more about personal fit with the manager than cultural fit with the company. “We give hiring managers a road map of questions that speak to our culture,” she says. “Without these questions, you leave a lot of room for interpretation and bias when trying to assess a candidate’s match.”

Janet Harding, director of cultural awareness and inclusion at Frederick Memorial Hospital in Maryland, uses role-playing so medical staff can understand that hidden bias is often a factor in patient care. All new employees attend workshops where they’re told a story about a patient experience and then asked to rank the story’s characters based on how “morally” they behaved. During one workshop, a woman who cared for people with substance abuse realized that she disliked working with addicts because as a child she had had to cope with the painful experience of a family member grappling with addiction.

“She realized that she had to put aside her personal feelings and be professional with whomever the patient was,” Harding says.

Taylor of deepSEE Consulting acknowledges that there are still too few companies that take the time or make the investment to root out hidden bias.

“We aren’t quite there yet,” she says. “It’s still at a surface level for a lot of organizations. But the good news is that more folks are paying attention to this.”

*Dana Wilkie is an online editor/manager for SHRM.*