

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS - HOW TO UNDERSTAND AND CHALLENGE IT



Highlights from the Major Projects Association event held on 3rd June 2016

In the latest gender balance initiative event, the Major Projects Association examined unconscious bias (UB), with the support of global engineering and consultancy firm Mott MacDonald. In a highly interactive session the company's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Richard Chapman-Harris, provided an insight into unconscious bias, how it affects business and how it can be challenged.

WHAT IS IT?

The first step was to understand what unconscious bias is, while acknowledging that we all have biases. Our brains are bombarded by roughly 200,000 pieces of information at any single point in time and yet the conscious thinking brain can only deal with about 40. Our unconscious brain sorts information very quickly; however this makes some decisions subjective rather than objective, which is problematic when it comes to business decisions or decisions based on people.

Using a range of tools – from asking participants to complete sentences to asking for their thoughts on images of people with a wide range of characteristics – examples of unconscious bias emerged. The presence of tattoos, for example, was a key discussion point, with some participants commenting that it was not appropriate to have tattooed employees in client-facing roles.

However Chapman-Harris challenged this with evidence from the London 2012 Games. During the Games British Transport Police ordered that officers must cover their tattoos with sleeves, assuming that tattoos would offend the travelling public. But in the heat of summer the requirement was soon challenged, and research undertaken to find out whether the public really were less likely to approach a police officer who had tattoos. The answer was 'no' – unless the tattoos themselves were offensive, with profanity or nudity for example.

Unconscious bias and assumption led to an inappropriate business decision, which was later reversed. In another example a member of staff went to a client meeting where the client was heavily tattooed and was surprised that the client was so articulate. Their unconscious bias had made decisions about the person based on their presentation, which turned out to be wrong.

'It's everything together that makes a difference; unconscious bias training needs to be part of a wider EDI action plan to effect culture change across the company.'

Sophie Lea, EDI Advisor, Mott MacDonald

What difference can UB make?

1

Age and experience:

Staff 'look too young to have gravitas with clients'

2

Gender and seniority:

Question how (senior) women 'manage work - life balance'

3

Race and nationality:

'International sounding names (or institutions) will not have same level of competence'

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS VS. PERFORMANCE

During the session participants worked in groups to examine how unconscious bias may be negatively impacting performance in their organisations. A range of issues and potential corrective actions were identified with some highlights listed.

Bias	Action
Using 'guys' to address a group that includes males and females.	Review and reflect on our use of language. Making small changes to the words we use e.g. 'using everyone' instead of 'guys' can help ensure that all staff are included.
Promotion criteria are not always clear and so there is no way of knowing whether unconscious bias has played a part in the selection process.	Make promotion criteria transparent and advertise opportunities to not miss out on potential talent
Contractors assume that the male member of staff is 'in charge' regardless of whether the woman there is more senior.	Challenge this. Tackle conscious and unconscious bias as damaging – role models and high visibility of women and Black Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) leaders is important.
Bias towards certain clients or markets can limit growth and diversity of business	Are you missing out on opportunities because of a lack of diversity? Review panels and diversify pool of reference within organisation
Female directors are criticised more often and more openly than male directors.	Unpicking gender bias – which is so ingrained in society – is difficult and needs a consistent approach. Senior female role models and majority, male advocates are important here.
Unconscious bias against women across the sector makes retention of female talent difficult.	Run leadership programmes, showcase role models, make interventions earlier in the pipeline.
The use of imagery and language in job adverts, and promotion criteria which is implicitly targeted more towards male candidates.	De-bias your job adverts and look out for traditionally gendered words which may put off female candidates. Use images showing a more diverse range of people.
Unconscious bias can play a factor in recruitment and candidates are not always assessed entirely on capability.	Review your job adverts for unnecessary requirements e.g. specifying years of experience. Assess candidates on their skills and competencies. Remove personal info from CVs.

TACKLING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

The first step to tackling unconscious bias is becoming aware of it, said Chapman-Harris as he talked the group through the initiatives that Mott MacDonald had in place throughout all levels of the organisation. Starting at Board level, Mott MacDonald brought in world-leading Professor of Behavioural Psychology, Binna Kandola, to deliver an unconscious bias workshop, and supported this with one-to-one directive coaching from the internal equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) team which identified any issues or gaps and led to creation of action plans for very senior staff.

It was then rolled out though the company in three ways:

- Through the Advanced Employee Network – diversity committee organised sessions in local areas.
- Through the HR team – next level down from the Board and key divisions such as recruitment saw UB training plotted into management sessions.
- Open sessions for all staff – ‘lunch and learn’.

Importantly feedback from all of these sessions is being fed back into the company’s EDI action plan. At the same time the company is also developing an E-learning package that can be delivered across the group and is suitable for all global locations.

‘One of the follow-up interventions that we look at is that it is not a standalone. The next intervention is inclusive leadership, so once you are aware of your biases and the limitations that they produce, the next step is then to say how do you adjust and tailor your style to be more inclusive and get the best from your team? It is a series of ongoing culture changes. Everyone comes into a business with baggage, and how do we unpack those bags to make sure they operate in an inclusive way?’

Richard Chapman-Harris, EDI Manager, Mott MacDonald

CHALLENGES

Recent research undertaken in Australia has questioned the efficacy of unconscious bias training, with experts noting that it assumes that bias in people can be eliminated and that simply raising awareness, however well done, does not yield results. Participants echoed a similar view, which was countered with the explanation that training to raise awareness must be followed with

How can we challenge our biases?

B

Be aware

We all have biases – realising this is the first step in tackling its impact

I

Investigate

Test yourself to identify ‘pinch points’ and focal areas

A

Act

Take proactive steps to unpick y/our biases. Several corporate examples available.

S

Share

Where possible, share your experiences and get others to help you tackle your bias areas

‘I work in training and see a lot of people coming to learning and development assuming that training will “fix it” and that they will come back informed. But training alone won’t change the industry. It is the bare minimum. You need additional support. The industry needs high-level role models who show the right behaviour – where someone flags bias and a senior manager says, “This is wrong, let’s change it”.’
Vio Krajacic, Learning and Development Manager, Bechtel Ltd

POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- What are your biases?
- Try an online test such as the [Harvard Implicit Association Test](#) and learn more about your own unconscious bias.
- What limitations could unconscious bias be creating for your business?

more  Major Projects Association Gender Balance Initiative

With grateful thanks to [Mott MacDonald](#) for hosting this event.

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