



Reducing the Potential for Bias

- Search committee chairs should discuss the potential for unintended bias during the initial meeting of the committee. It should be made clear that this mention is not a commentary on the particular search, but rather a recognition of processes that research suggests can influence decision making. Citations from selected articles may enhance the discussion.

- As the search enters certain key stages or decision points, it's an opportunity for the chair to again mention the potential for implicit bias and offer specific examples. Committee members should be particularly vigilant during these key stages of the search process:

- Publicity and advertising
- Deciding where to look for outstanding "out of the box candidates"
- Phone interviews with perspective candidates
- Review of CVs
- Face-to-face interviews
- Job talks and group presentations
- Developing a short list or final candidate(s)

- Having a broadly diverse committee can foster authentic dialogue regarding particular biases, but one should not look to a particular individual to initiate dialogue about the potential for bias. This is the responsibility of every member of the committee.

- Attempting to repress personal biases and stereotypes has been shown to not be effective in reducing unconscious bias; instead you might reflect on what 3-5 implicit biases you might have, based on your upbringing and life experiences. Everyone has some implicit biases. Recognizing and acknowledging one's own specific biases, when they appear to be operating, and then refuting and challenging them, can be helpful. Research suggests that this strategy can often inhibit the activation of stereotypes.

*Although the search committee chair has particular responsibility, all committee members bear responsibility and should be active participants in contributing to the reduction of implicit bias.

*"Fortunately for serious minds,
a bias recognized is a bias sterilized."*

— Benjamin Haydon, English Historical Painter and Writer.

Potential Impact on the Search Process

There is increased recognition that in addition to overt bias and discrimination, implicit associations impact many aspects of today's workplaces. Like the work of Dr. Banaji, much of the research in this area focuses on employment decisions—hiring, promotion and discharge. During the life of a search committee, innumerable decisions are made that impact the final choice of an individual candidate or a list of finalists. Some of the decisions are concrete (candidates to be invited to campus), while others are more subtle ("didn't convey a sense of leadership" during the interview). Both data driven assessments and more subjective responses to candidates are often appropriate and useful in the decision-making process. However, an unintentional, and even unconscious negative response to a candidate can result in implicit bias. Research suggests that height, weight, race, gender, accent, tone of voice, dress, etc., can trigger an unconscious bias for or against a particular candidate.

The source of this bias is often not readily accessible to the individual who shows it—it's "hidden" or out of awareness. So that, a search committee member may exercise diligence in her or his assessment of a candidate, however, the potential for unintended bias impacts the decisions of even the most fair-minded individuals. In fact, research suggests that although the processes of conscious and unconscious awareness are related, they operate separately. Therefore, conscious and unconscious attitudes can substantially differ.

Potential Activation Cues

Personal attributes and identity characteristics, particularly those that have been historically associated with bias in our country, can be fertile ground (cues) for bias. These cues might signal important and appropriate factors to consider during a selection process or they might reflect a negative personal or prevailing societal bias. Activation cues include, but are not limited to:

Height and Weight: Personal and societal preferences for height ("tall men") and weight ("slim"), as well as interactions with gender and race, can contribute in subtle ways to a candidate's assessed competencies.

Gender: Judgments of *curriculum vitae* have shown to be influenced by gender. *Vitae* with male names have been judged more positively than the same vitae with female names. Presentation style has also been shown to interact with gender in influencing people's judgments of an individual.

Race: Perceived race and complexion can influence the assessment of leadership qualities as well as judgments that are sometimes made about presentation style, etc.

Accent and Voice Tone: Research suggests that some accents are judged as "pleasing" and others as "less pleasing." Voice pitch has been shown to play a role in leader selection.

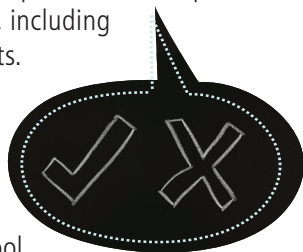
University/Organization: Generalizations are sometimes made about **all** candidates from certain schools or organizations. This can result in bias in favor or against a given candidate.

Implicit Association – What It Is

Associations that affect our choices and decisions are the result of both conscious and unconscious mental processes. For example, research suggests when asked about associations between “overweight individuals” and the “capacity to be an effective employee,” most people might say that one’s weight is not related to job performance. They might go on to say that job performance is the result of skill level, personal motivation, as well as appropriate management and the organizational context. This explicit, conscious assessment might be very different than one’s implicit or unconscious view of “overweight individuals.”

A “test” of one’s unconscious attitudes about weight and competence might reveal a strong bias—a negative association between weight and work competence. It is this implicit association that has the potential for negatively impacting the search process. Recent research suggests that the influence of bias is reduced when people have a clearer recognition and understanding of the implicit association process, as well as an understanding of the potential for their own tendencies or preferences. It is recommended that search committees openly discuss the process and its potential for, in an unintended manner, including or excluding certain applicants.

The Implicit Association Test (IAT), available online at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>, is the most frequently used tool to “access” unconscious associations. It can reveal unconscious attitudes that are often at odds with conscious beliefs and statements. Professor **Mahzarin Banaji**, of Harvard University, and her colleagues have developed this online test and have authored numerous papers about the IAT and the potential implications of unconscious biases for decision making.



Resources

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