

STRONG FEMALE LEAD

YOU'RE MORE BIASED THAN YOU THINK

EVEN THE MOST OPEN-MINDED PERSON HARBORS A LOT OF UNCONSCIOUS BIASES. HERE'S HOW TO START RECOGNIZING AND ELIMINATING THEM.

BY JANE PORTER

Every day we make countless decisions without realizing it.

Researchers call this "unconscious bias." It's happening right now as you read this.

You're faced with around 11 million pieces of information at any given moment, according to Timothy Wilson, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia and author of the book *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*. The brain can only process about 40 of those bits of information and so it creates shortcuts and uses past knowledge to make assumptions.

How and why our brains choose the way they do has been generating lots of conversation at Google, which recently announced a workshop focused on unconscious biases. Sure, studying the unconscious decisions we make can be critical when it comes to designing products or software people use, but more importantly, it's critical when trying to uncover precisely what's wrong with our workplace today.

"We are so powerfully guided by the things we expect to be true in the world," says Brian Welle, director of people analytics at Google, in a video promoting the initiative.

This initiative is clearly strategically timed given that Google and other Silicon Valley tech companies have come under fire recently for the lack of diversity in their ranks. Still, challenging unconscious biases is one attempt at making hiring managers aware of the hidden preferences they bring to decision making--ones that stand in the way to hiring the best people for the job.

"Most of us believe that we are ethical and unbiased. We imagine we're good decision makers, able to objectively size up a job

candidate or a venture deal and reach a fair and rational conclusion that's in our, and our organization's, best interests," writes Harvard University researcher Mahzarin Banaji in Harvard Business Review. "But more than two decades of research confirms that, in reality, most of us fall woefully short of our inflated self-perception."

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Take the study out of Yale University that asked science researchers to rate two candidates for a lab manager position--a male and a female--both with the same qualifications. Participants, including both men and women, rated the male candidate as more qualified and were willing to pay him a higher starting salary than his female counterpart. "Despite efforts to recruit and retain more women, a stark gender disparity persists within academic science," the researchers wrote. And the disparity isn't just happening in academia.

This translates into a huge issue in the workplace. "Those of us who are raised in a cultural context have those implicit associations," says Welle in a Google workshop on the topic. "It doesn't matter if you're male or female. We all have them." Is there a way to change unconscious biases that influence who we hire, promote, and most value at work? There's certainly no simple approach, but according to Welle, there are four places you can begin.

FOCUS ON SKILLS AND ELIMINATE DISTRACTIONS

A study through the Clayman Institute of Gender Studies at Stanford found that the number of women musicians in orchestras went up from 5% to 25% since the 1970s--a shift that happened when judges began auditioning musicians behind screens so that they could not see them. This isn't to say that all interviews have to be done blind of course, but that refocusing on the skills that define a candidate can help eliminate biases we may be bringing with us to our decision-making.

One way to do that, the Stanford researchers found, is to create clear criteria for evaluating candidates before looking at their qualifications. They found that gender biases in choosing between a male and female candidate for a police chief position, for example, were reduced when those making the selection had set up criteria before reviewing applicants. Welle cites the study as a case for standardizing interview questions. "Make sure all people answer the same exact questions," he says. "All the research out there shows unstructured interviews are the worst way to make a hiring decision."

LET THE NUMBERS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

It's easy to deny personal biases, but disproving data isn't so simple. Even Google makes mistakes. After a research report by Spark Summit called out the company for over-representing white men in its Google Doodles with only 17% of doodles honoring women and less than 5% honoring women of color, the company realized it had to be more conscious of the decisions it was making.

To better understand how you and your workplace are handling such issues, look at the data available and what it's telling you.

ACKNOWLEDGE MICROAGGRESSION

All throughout the day, we send subtle messages to the people around us through our body language, word choice and behavior. Derald Wing Sue, professor of counseling psychology at Columbia University calls these signals "microaggressions," which can have a profound and detrimental effect on the people around us.

"Microaggressions are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults," Sue writes in his book, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*.

Becoming hyperconscious of the language you use, who you choose to interact with and how during the day can cue you into how your language and behavior affects the people around you. Small details can make a difference. At Google, for instance, a number of conference rooms, which have traditionally been named after scientists, were renamed after women scientists to balance out the gender representation.

TALK ABOUT IT

Calling out someone on his or her biases can help people become more conscious of the decisions they are making. Promoting that kind of open discussion at work is an important step in actually making a change. When a hiring decision is made, for example, what are the reasons for making that decision? Taking a group approach to decision making can also help point out those unconscious biases out there.

It's not just Google that has a long way to go in getting there--across industries and workplaces, becoming more aware of the unconscious decisions we're making could help slowly move the needle in the right direction. "You have to create that openness in your culture in order for these concepts to take route," says Welle.