

The Impact of Unconscious Bias in Recruitment Process

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: The research paper aims at establishing the kinds of unconscious bias that affects the recruiting process and how can it be acknowledged to ensure equality while recruiting.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS: This paper portrays a brief about how Unconscious bias affects the recruitment process and suggests ways to overcome it. The thesis includes various research papers and online articles for reference.

FINDINGS: Discrimination in recruiting process is a concurring problem which persists even with laws prohibiting it. Mostly, immigrants or people with immigrant background and women face these direct or indirect discrimination. Immigrants are not the only people that face discrimination at workplace. In a study conducted in 2018 it was said that 6% people faced bias in their recruiting process. However, in most of these cases discrimination is caused by the Unconscious bias and if we can recognize it in time we can stop the discrimination that takes place. Most of the companies internationally as well as nationally have accepted the Unconscious bias being present at their workplace and are actively trying to minimize it by launching various activities and seminars for its employees to educate them about how unconscious occurs and what impact it has in the recruitment process as well as in the working of the organization.

ORIGINALITY/VALUE: The research paper is on the topic Role of Unconscious Bias in the recruitment process. Secondary research conducted on the topic shows that Unconscious bias has a negative effect on the recruitment process as it affects the decision made by the recruiter.

KEYWORDS: Unconscious Bias, Discrimination, Recruitment Process.

I. INTRODUCTION

Unconscious bias also known as implicit bias are the unconscious feelings a person has toward other people or the instinctive feelings that influence the judgements away from being balanced and fair towards everyone. Unconscious bias occurs involuntarily, automatically and is beyond someone's awareness, it is triggered when a person is quick to judge a situation or another person. Unconscious bias can have harmful consequences, as we often rely on a person's assumption about the other and try to make connections based on the positive or negative attributes, these connections are social hierarchies that would value some people more than the others. One of the most common places where unconscious bias persists in the workplace, one of the strongest biases we have at work place is Gender Bias. Basic things like how or where we are brought up from, how we have socialized, our exposure towards the other cultures or social groups, our friends and the media influences and affect what we think about certain category of people. Generally, these situations occur when the recruiter is highly stressed or is under pressure to make a decision or he/she is involved in multiple tasks at the same time.

Unconscious bias can manifest itself in several ways, the following are bias you may encounter and how it may affect the interactions:

1. **Affinity Bias:** It occurs when the recruiter can relate to the person in some way, so the preference is given to that person as the recruiter could relate to him/her. This can happen because of shared characteristics like, sharing similar hobbies at workplace, having same ethnicity or having the same geographical background.
2. **Attribution Bias:** This refers to the situation when the recruiters perceive our actions and those of others as well. In a way we reflect our own success through our skills, failures and factors that are outside our control.
3. **Beauty Bias:** This bias is self-explanatory; it occurs in a situation where the recruiters base someone of their looks or appearance. Although it is said not to "**Judge a book by its cover**" in this we may unconsciously favour attractive people for the job despite their qualifications compared to others.
4. **Confirmation Bias:** This refers to a situation in which the recruiters try to find evidence to back up his initial views about someone while ignoring the information that may contradict his initial views.

5. **Conformity Bias:** This refers to a situation in which the recruiter takes cues from his panellists to make a decision, rather than exercising his own independent judgement of the situation.
6. **Contrast Effect:** This refers to situation where the recruiter compare and contrast people and other things all the time to put them in context. But, instead of comparing the employees on the basis of their merits, comparison here might be favourable for one and unfavourable for the other resulting in a bias.
7. **Gender Bias:** Gender bias is the most common forms of bias that takes place at the workplace, these can get the recruiters in trouble for discrimination. Gender bias at workplace may include situations in which a male applicant is chosen over a women applicant in most cases not because of qualifications but on the basis that the role is more physically demanding.
8. **Halo Effects:** This situation describes the recruiter's tendency to particularly focus on one good aspect about the applicant and letting that one thing over power his opinion about that person, while overlooking the negative aspect of the person which can ultimately lead the recruiter in choosing the wrong person for the role.

Researchers have stated in their studies that unconscious bias is present in various professions, contexts and are pervasive. Unconscious bias saturate organizational cultures which has an effect on the formal and informal decision making processes. In the organizations unconscious bias affects choices such has whom to mentor, who should be invited to external events, who should work on a particular project and in some cases it also influences how a person may evaluate another person. Unconscious bias has an influence on the recruitment process in a way that the employers or the recruiters might not even realize. The unintentional discrimination in the recruitment process can potentially result in certain prejudicial assumptions or judgements about the candidate that might not be true and it may make difficult for the candidates from traditionally under represented class to be hired for these jobs.

Objectives

1. To study the challenges faced by recruiters while recruiting fresh talent.
2. To highlight the unconscious bias that is prevalent in recruitment.
3. To study the impact of unconscious bias on talent acquisition.

¹ Meir Shemla. (2018) Why Workplace Diversity Is So Important, And Why It's So Hard to Achieve.

² Karanja, K.; Namusonge, G.; Kireru, C.J.I. Role of Talent Acquisition Processes on Competitive Advantage of Telecommunication Firms in

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Every day applicants are either hired or not hired on the basis of factors that might not have anything to do with their ability to do the said job. One of the main reasons for this is Unconscious bias, unconscious bias happens automatically and is not in our control, the brain quickly makes a judgement about the people or situation.

Researchers (**Shemla 2018**)¹ stated that the working environment has changed a lot in the past few years and has become more diverse. Diversity can be seen as an advantage at workplace, yet the companies are not able to match their goals. Companies are ready to make certain diverse policies but are having a hard time implementing it.

(**Kangas 2019**)² in their research stated that the discrimination still exists in the recruitment process as in a survey conducted by him it was seen that 42% companies do not prefer people with foreign name as compared to a name they are more familiar to or is a person belonging to the same background as of the recruiter.

(**Martti et al. 2019**) in their research reflected the outcome of a survey they had done in Finland which showed that majority of the companies in Finland either prefer people with Finnish background or people that have a Finnish looking face. They also said that foreign name in itself is a huge problem when it comes employment.

To study the challenges faced by recruiters while recruiting fresh talent

According to (**Mahzarin Banaji 2013**)³, most of the recruiters believe that they are ethical and unbiased while making their decision and assume that they are able objectively decide the correct candidate for the job which is in the organisation's best interest. But more than 20 years of study reveals that this is not true and most of the recruiters have inflated self-perception. He stated that Bias affects the decision making process in numerous ways:

- Our Perception – how we perceive people.
- Our Attitude – how we react in front of different people.
- Our Behaviours – how friendly we are towards these people.
- Our Attention – which aspect of the person we pay attention to most of the times.
- Our Listening Skills – how much we actively listen to what the person says.

In his research (**Cuellar 2017, 333.**), revealed that people grow with bias set up by their background and culture and as they proceed in life they develop more through positive or negative experiences. Unconscious bias plays an important

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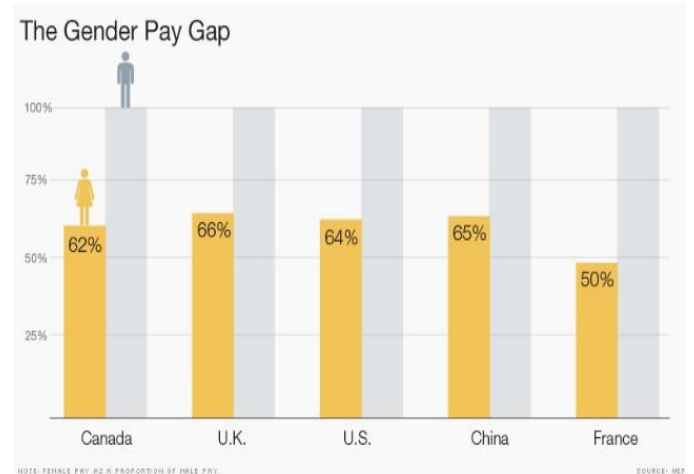
³ Mahzarin R. Banaji (2013), Max H. Bazerman, and Dolly Chugh How (Un)ethical Are You?

role in making daily decisions, but is important to notice when this bias may lead to unequal or unfavourable decisions. There are many types of unconscious bias which means that they activate differently according to different situations.

(Koivunen et al. 2015, 4.)⁴, In his research stated that applicants assume that the recruitment process is based on the skills and qualifications of the person but this is not true favouritism and discrimination affects the majority of the decisions. In a study he that he quoted showed that 6% of the respondents felt that they were discriminated in the recruitment process. The discrimination here was based on the age groups, gender (being a female), nationality, skin colour, language spoken and in some cases applicants were rejected if they had a foreign name or name that the recruiter did not like. To highlight the unconscious bias that is prevalent in recruitment.

Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds and Cancelli (2000)⁵, in their study revealed that race is one of the major social factors affecting the daily lives of the people. Racial discrimination is faced in every country around the globe, even if it is a developing country or a developed country the discrimination between whites and blacks is present in every field or profession. He stated that chances of a black person are very less as a compared to a white person if they apply in the same company with the white guy having less qualification he will still be selected. Ma, R.; Allen, D.G. (2009)⁶, in their study they quoted a survey conducted by them showcasing the discrimination based on foreign names, it showed that employers are more likely to recruit people with names that are in the dominant group as compared to names that are not in the dominant group; such as a person with a white sounding name such as George or Emily is more likely to be selected as compared to a black sounding names or Arab or Muslim sounding names like Jamal or Lakisha. In a study they conducted where they compared resume of a male named John and a female named Jennifer, it was seen that John is more likely to get high salary or raise in his salary as compared to Jennifer which shows the gender bias present at workplace. Wood et al. (2009)⁷, in their research showcased the racial bias in the recruitment process of UK companies, he stated that white candidates were able to get 68% of their responses selected by the recruiters and the black candidates were able to get only 39% and that to only when they had a similar profile, this highlighted that there was a 29% difference in

response based on the racial discrimination. Despite the steps taken by the UK government to reduce racial discrimination it still exists.



As per the above graph Joseph, Ang, and Slaughter, (2015)⁸, in their research revealed that the pay gap at workplaces has reduced in the past few decades but still exist, the research states that the pay base in USA stands at 64% which means that female workers are earning just below two thirds of what a male employee earns and similar is in the cases of the other mentioned countries where women are discriminated when it comes to salary.

To study the impact of unconscious bias on talent acquisition.

According to Herrbach and Mignonac (2012)⁹, While the employers try to maintain the legal standards the unconscious bias issues still exist in talent acquisition. Unconscious bias is pervasive and can occur at any stage of the recruitment process. A recruiter might unconsciously write a job description for a vacancy that might be appealing for a particular gender or a specific background of people when in reality it might not be. A recruiter might be looking to fill a vacancy in the IT department but while advertising he might put vacancy in Coding department or JAVA Engine which might not appeal to females a lot as it a more masculine language.

During the screening process of the candidates they might feel affinity bias, it is a type of bias when someone from a specific background is chosen over other applicants. An example of this might be that a recruiter might prefer applicants from a specific college or having a specific degree that they think is important which might not be, at company

⁴ Koivunen, T. and Ylöstalo, H. and Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta, K. (2015). Informal practices of inequality in recruitment in Finland. Nordic journal of working life studies, 5(3): 3-21.

⁵ Utsey, S. O., Ponterotto, J. G., Reynolds, A. L., & Cancelli, A. A. (2000). Racial discrimination, coping, life satisfaction, and self-esteem among African Americans.

⁶ Rong Ma, David G. Allen, Recruiting across cultures: A value-based model of recruitment, Human Resource Management Review, Volume 19, Issue 4, 2009.

⁷ Wood, M., Hales, J., Purdon, S., Sejersen, T. and Hayllar, O. (2009). A test for racial discrimination in recruitment practice in British cities. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report, 607.

⁸ Joseph, D., Ang, S., and Slaughter, S. A. (2015). Turnover or turn away? Competing risks analysis of male and female IT professionals' job mobility and relative pay gap. Information Systems Research, 26(1), 145-164.

⁹ Herrbach, O., Mignonac, K., & Gatignon, A.-L. (2004). Exploring the role of perceived external prestige in man-agers' turnover intentions. International Journal of Human Resource Management, 15, 1390-1407.

level bias can go to an extent where the recruiters will only select people of certain age regardless of their experience or qualifications.

When unconscious bias is spread in the applicant pool chances of bigger organisational problems such as lack of organisational diversity may rise. **OAKLAND, Calif., May 10, 2017 /PRNewswire/¹⁰**, in their study on Deloitte found that a more diverse workforce is likely to meet or exceed a company's over financial goals, in another study it was cited that a 34% higher returns to shareholders for companies that had more women at executive positions.

COMPANY SPOTLIGHTS

Companies worldwide have acknowledged the need for diversity and equality in their employee work base. Some of the companies revealed their strategies and diversification methods to stop bias at the workplace.

GOOGLE

When it comes diversity at work place between the employees, Google has made numerous public statements regarding its workplace environment, with claiming that they can do even better than the current scenario. In 2014, Google had released a public statement about 56,000 of its employees, saying that 70% of them were Men, Latinos working at Google had a share of 3% and African American being 2%. Another shocking fact that was revealed stated that out of 36 executives of Google only 3 were women executives.

Google quoted this as something they do not stand by and stated that the work place lacked diversity and one of the major reasons behind it was unconscious bias, to tackle the problem of bias they announced a bias-busting initiative. The purpose of these initiatives were to hold seminars and meetings between employees to make them aware about the Bias that may exist at the workplace. By the end of the year more than 2000 Google employees had attended these workshops and had participated in the Seminars organised which were 90 minutes long and for the people that could not attend a YouTube video was uploaded for them.

ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

In May, 2013, the Royal Bank of Canada decided to launch a program to educate 78,000 of its on-board employees about the impact unconscious bias has at the workplace. The program was worldwide for every employee working for Royal Bank of Canada. More than 1000 employees working for Royal Bank of India have thus far attended the workshop to make themselves aware about the unconscious bias at the work place.

The employees after attending the workshops were given a test paper made out by Harvard to check how the employees

are able to identify their bias and try to overcome it as time passes.

III. METHODOLOGY & LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Secondary research refers to the way of collection of data involving, use of already existing data. The already collected data is summarized and used in research to increase its effectiveness.

This study is not explanatory and lack data as it is based on secondary research by referring to various online articles and websites. Primary data was not collected due to time constraints. The data collected lacks originality as it is based on Secondary research for the numerical data of previous years.

IV. CONCLUSION

Recruiters should implement ways to manage effects of bias, they should evaluate program stats by dividing them into different parts such as; race, gender and ethnicity and should try to look for patterns of bias in recruitment process and should try to reduce it. It can be concluded that bias still exist in recruitment process of companies of both developing and developed countries. It is important to recognise and develop strategies to overcome this bias and to create a diverse team as teams with people of different ethnic background are likely to do better as compared to others as there are more minds working together and more innovative ideas could be entertained.

The Human Resource department or the department for professional talent management, can make an effective and positive impact at their workplace by conducting these activities that minimizes the unconscious bias at work place which will result in a more diversified work environment and helping companies to make schemes accordingly for employee welfare.

Just like Google, Royal Bank of Canada and many other companies all over the globe have acknowledged the unconscious bias at workplace, other companies should also take steps accordingly, launch seminars or hold meetings with the employees and let them know the impact of unconscious bias or how it can be conducted without even the employee being aware about it. At the end of the day, these organizations making a better work environment for its employees without unconscious bias will help them as these things affect the whole working of the organization.

It is important to mention that bias in most of the cases do not come for a bad intent or a purpose, it is just a deep seated unconscious situation that is formed in our brain through the years of different influences we might not even have control on it.

¹⁰ OAKLAND, Calif., May 10, 2017 /PRNewswire/.

Some of the ways that the recruiters can chose to reduce or eliminate bias are:

1. Working with more diverse people and try to get them know individually.
2. Be patient while making a decision as our brain can only work up 40 things consciously but more than 10 million things unconsciously.
3. The top management should also chuck in and try to arrange training programs for their recruiting team to make them aware about what bias is how to avoid it while recruitment.
4. Companies could start employee trainings or organize seminars on what unconscious bias is or how it impacts the decision making process during the recruitment process. They can also diversify their working environment as having more diverse people will help the company to have more ideas and from all perspectives which will in return help in the development of the organization.
5. Companies could also go for the Implicit Association Test, which was basically established in the year 1998, by the psychologists of various reputed universities, Harvard, university of Virginia and University of Washington. The main purpose of the test was to help people analyse their level of unconscious bias at the workplace, and since its launch more than 6 million people have tested it and recommended it after the results.

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