



A Closer Look Unconscious Bias: An AI Perspective

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by Deb Cohen, PhD, Head of Research



Introduction

It is widely known that we all have unconscious biases. It's also widely known that while being aware of unconscious bias is important, awareness is not sufficient to change or stop bias that occurs in the workplace—or anywhere else for that matter. Unconscious, or implicit bias occurs when a person unknowingly allows attitudes, feelings, stereotypes or beliefs to impact their judgment about people. It is unconscious because it isn't done deliberately; it is an involuntary reaction based on deep-seated thoughts. Every human being is prone to jumping to conclusions, misjudging people and favoring some more than others whether they realize it or not. Explicit bias, on the other hand, refers to attitudes and beliefs people have on a conscious level.

In the workplace, unconscious bias can slip into job descriptions, interview questions, the perceptions employees have of co-workers and employment decisions managers make. For example, "clear," "confident" and "outspoken" may be qualities used to positively describe men but are often considered negative qualities when attributed to women. Although many biases are small and seemingly inconsequential, they can add up and affect an organization's decision-making processes and culture, particularly with respect to talent acquisition and development. Table 1 shows the types of biases, both implicit and explicit, that often sneak into everyday life.

Types of Bias: Implicit or Explicit

Table 1

Affinity bias: Favoring people like ourselves

Attribution bias: Explaining our own actions in terms of circumstance and others' actions as flaws

Beauty bias: Thinking that attractive people will be more successful than less attractive people or considering other personal attributes (height, weight, hair, etc.)

Confirmation bias: Seeking information that confirms pre-existing beliefs or assumptions

Conformity bias: Needing to conform because of peer-group pressure

Contrast bias: Comparing people against each other rather than a standard; comparing individuals against one another is sometimes intended but can have negative consequences when not intended

Halo and horns bias: Thinking everything is good about a person (or everything is bad) because you like them or think one thing is especially good

Insider bias: Favoring people in one's in-group versus those in an out-group

Intuition bias: Selectively paying attention to the facts that support the conclusion we want

Overconfidence bias: Having greater subjective confidence in our own judgment than objective assessments warrant

Similarity bias: Selecting people who are more similar than different from us

AI and automation will dramatically change how work and business gets done in the future. What, though, will change and what will remain the same as organizations tackle these issues? How will organizations use AI and automation to compete in this new landscape? One thing that will not change is unconscious bias. Can AI and automation help minimize it? The unfortunate reality is that unconscious bias can also sneak into AI applications and algorithms. Critics suggest that AI and automation may not only perpetuate unconscious bias but exacerbate it.

In some cases, it already has. A large metropolitan city (Boston), for example, decided to use an AI app its residents could use to detect and report rough surfaces while driving. The app's intent was to pinpoint where more potholes existed to prioritize resources for repairs. But the residents using the app were predominantly younger and more affluent than the city's population as a whole. Rather than getting a picture of the entire city, the app pointed the city to the only more affluent areas, perpetuating the challenge of how limited resources may not be evenly distributed across populations.

Unconscious bias also influences workplace diversity. For example, selecting teams that look like the leader or assuming working mothers are less career oriented than others. These unconscious choices and assumptions influence culture and diversity and inclusion (D&I) in the workplace. D&I programs seek to address the issues of conscious and unconscious bias, so employers and employees are treated fairly and suffer no negative consequences. When implemented, the objective of D&I programs is to eliminate or reduce the effects of overt discrimination and unconscious bias. Not all organizations take positive steps to address their unconscious bias or D&I challenges.

Training and education are proven to have a positive impact on raising awareness and reducing bias, and some organizations are providing this training for their employees. Earlier this year the Ford Motor Company ramped up efforts to create an inclusive workplace by addressing unconscious bias in Asia Pacific through a training program that was created to identify and fix subtle biases that can erode morale and slow innovation.¹

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: Unconscious bias occurs in all cultures, but dimensions of diversity vary by country or region. While there are certainly cultural differences that exist across the world that must be accounted for in issues of talent, contracting and business in general, bias must be understood and addressed to support the needs of the business. Since many CEOs and business leaders are making D&I a priority, there is increased motivation to offer solutions to streamline talent acquisition and to reduce bias. CEOs in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and in the Americas need to understand bias and address issues of awareness and business outcomes related to bias.²

AI/Automation and Talent Acquisition

Effective talent acquisition and development are challenging even in the best of times. What happens when AI replaces some of the historically people-based talent acquisition processes? It is already happening. For example, chatbots (programs designed to simulate conversations with humans over the internet) are interacting with job candidates, have been used to approve requests for paid time off and have even been used to improve wording in job listings.³ If a chatbot for candidate screening is programmed (by a human) to use certain words or phrases that may not be familiar to a subset of the population, then that system is inadvertently creating bias in building a candidate pool. Even organizations with well-regarded and effective talent management practices must focus on the underlying issue of unconscious bias. Like it or not, AI has and is changing how organizations attract, select and manage talent.

The benefits of AI-based talent acquisition are potentially vast. Hilton Hotels was able to drop the time-to-invite for job candidates for their call center from 42 days to five by using AI in their pre-hire assessments.⁴ Cost savings and efficiency measures such as this are quite impressive and exciting. But is widespread AI application in talent acquisition possible, and are there drawbacks? The focus on D&I has been sharpened in recent years with many CEOs making D&I a higher priority.³ Because D&I and unconscious bias have become so important in organizations, the lure of AI and automation is significant. However, critics remain concerned that AI applications intended to improve talent processes could perpetuate biases in hiring and promotion rather than alleviate them. This makes sense to those who understand and are concerned about unconscious bias. AI systems must be programmed by people whose biases may well find their way into the AI system. This will perpetuate bias, not lessen it.

For example, if an AI algorithm gauges how much weight a person can lift and the cutoff for the job is set high, perhaps at 70 pounds/32 kilograms, a disproportionate number of women may not pass the assessment hurdle. If the ability to lift this much weight is accurate for the job, then there is no problem—but if the weight limit is set more arbitrarily (perhaps by a strong man), then bias has inadvertently occurred. Similarly, if an algorithm asks about qualifications and the bar to pass is a university degree at a minimum, it is possible that a disproportionate number of minorities will be left out of the candidate pool. If a university degree is nice to have but not an actual requirement for success, bias has occurred.

Hiring managers often say that they know what “excellent job performance” looks like for their open positions. While this may be true, it does not mean hiring managers can articulate what they need or want without unconscious bias creeping in. Similarly, recruiters who have historically sifted through stacks of resumes (and more recently profile links) to narrow down the matches to open positions may not do so without bias inadvertently sneaking into their decisions. How will these biases

be kept out of AI-based programs? The answer: carefully and with a great deal of evidence, research and training. In short, like how we should be keeping bias in check now.

There are a variety of challenges and opportunities with respect to using AI-based tools in talent acquisition. For example:

- When less data is available, even with AI, hiring managers may be more affected by unconscious bias because assumptions may creep in.
- AI databases must be constantly kept up-to-date, and all candidates must be evaluated on the same data points; as a result, some data that doesn't cover all candidates should not be used.
- AI can aggregate the wealth of data that exists beyond a standard resume or curriculum vitae (CV).
- Workplace decisions go beyond recruitment and selection. AI-based tools have not yet advanced to this level.
- AI-based tools can potentially reduce unconscious bias by screening candidates based on knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) rather than race, gender or other biased factors.
- AI can identify patterns in hiring, promotion, training and job assignments that could positively or negatively influence D&I.
- AI might help get the right candidate into the pool, but ultimately it is a person who makes the hiring decision.
- AI focuses on recruitment and hiring, not on other HR decisions; promotions, task assignments and performance evaluations are also selection and talent-related decisions.

AI systems must be programmed and trained. Systems trained with bias will, themselves, be biased. Training is important. However, a system based on AI in the talent acquisition realm must include analysis and processes that will evaluate the impact of decisions made with respect to D&I and unconscious bias. AI may ultimately help reduce unconscious bias, but it is not a shortcut to removing bias. The unconscious bias code has not been cracked yet with decades of research and focus. It should not be expected that AI will do this quickly, perfectly or without evaluation and refinement. In the future, AI systems may be making judgments instead of people. If those systems can be designed to be bias free, then candidate selection will take less time, be more objective and potentially be more diverse. But the "if" in this statement needs to be emphasized.

Conclusion and Recommendations

What can organizations do to address unconscious bias in a world of AI and automation? Remember that everyone has biases, intended or not. And realize that bias is not necessarily eliminated because an AI system made the decision instead of a person. Organizations should:

- Continue to review outcomes for talent management especially after AI-tools are adopted.
- Set goals for D&I programs and do so with some level of granularity and specificity.
- Evaluate how all systems, people and AI-based, perform with respect to attraction, selection, promotion, training performance evaluation and so forth.
- Promote awareness of unconscious bias and do so with visible advocacy from the top.
- Invest in training and support-related training initiatives. Awareness is not enough.
- Unconscious bias can shape an organization's culture and can skew talent and performance reviews; as a result, regular audits of culture and outcomes should be conducted.

Unconscious bias adds risk and cost to the talent acquisition process. AI in and of itself does not alleviate that risk. These concerns and cautions, however, should not thwart attempts to use AI for good with respect to talent acquisition and management. There is a distinct upside to using AI, and the wave of use is gaining speed, not slowing. The use of AI in the talent acquisition and management process may help eliminate or ease unconscious bias. So, go forth with AI solutions relating to talent but do so with cautiously and monitor the outcomes. Create accountability for both the technology application and with the outcomes from the use of the technology.

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The Future Talent Council is a global strategy group focused on understanding and influencing the future of talent and work. We engage the foremost educational, political and business leaders of society to shape global, regional and industry agendas.

To address the pending global employment issues, The Future Talent Council (FTC) was formed in 2017 by Lars-Henrik Friis Molin, the founder of Universum Global and numerous other companies. Future Talent Council is based in Stockholm with offices in Singapore, Sydney and New York.

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Please feel free to visit our website at futuretalentcouncil.com or contact us by email at info@futuretalentcouncil.com.