

## **Unconscious Bias Briefing**

Despite striving to be objective, people often hold implicit or unconscious assumptions that influence their judgement. Examples range from expectations or assumptions about physical or social characteristics associated with gender, ethnicity and age to those associated with certain jobs, academic institutions and fields of study.

One example reported by Goldin and Rouse<sup>1</sup> concerned the hiring of musicians by major symphony orchestras. When the identity of auditioners was withheld from the judging panel and they were placed behind a screen, the orchestras increasingly hired women.

Examples from STEM-related fields have also been reported. Steinpreis et al.<sup>2</sup> reported a study where 238 academic psychologists evaluated an early-career CV which had been randomly assigned a male or female name. Both male and female assessors gave the male candidates better evaluations for teaching, research and service and were more likely to employ the male than the female candidate.

Wenneras and Wold<sup>3</sup> reported a study of evaluators' rating sheets for postdoctoral fellowships awarded by the Medical Research Council in Sweden. They found that women candidates need substantially more publications to achieve the same rating as men: the equivalent of three more papers in *Nature* or *Science*, or 20 more papers in speciality journals.

Trix and Psenka<sup>4</sup> studied over 300 letters of recommendation for medical faculty who were hired by a large American medical school in the 1990s. They found that letters written for women were shorter, raised more doubts and portrayed women more as students and teachers while portraying men more as researchers and professionals.

Similar effects have been reported for race and ethnicity.

<sup>1</sup> **Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of "Blind" Auditions on Female Musicians**, Claudia Goldin; Cecilia Rouse, *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 90, No. 4. (Sep., 2000).

<sup>2</sup> **The Impact of Gender on the Review of the Curricula Vitae of Job Applicants and Tenure Candidates: A National Empirical Study**, Rhea E. Steinpreis, Katie A. Anders and Dawn Ritzke, *Sex Roles*, Vol. 41, Nos. 7/8, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> **Nepotism and sexism in peer-review**, Christine Wennerås and Agnes Wold, *Nature* Vol 387, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> **Exploring the Color of Glass: Letters of Recommendation for Female and Male Medical Faculty**, Frances Trix and Carolyn Psenka, *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 191-220 (2003)

### **Overcoming Unconscious Bias**

The difficulty with unconscious bias is of course that individuals are unaware that bias is influencing their decisions. However, there are some general points of good practice that panel members should adopt in order to minimise the effects of unconscious bias:

- ensure that evaluation criteria are understood and applied consistently;
- ensure sufficient time is allowed for the evaluation of each candidate. Reducing time pressures increases the likelihood that all applicants will receive a fair assessment
- evaluate each candidate's entire application;
- be able to defend every decision for eliminating or advancing a candidate against the evaluation criteria.

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