Unconscious Bias

When we use a computer or smartphone, what we see's only a tiny part of what's going on. In the background there are thousands of bits of information being processed, and our brains work in a similar way.

What we process consciously is only a very small part of the information we receive. Much of the rest, about 11,000,000 pieces of information a second, is handled by our unconscious mind, without us even realising it's happening.

One reason the unconscious mind can process so much information so quickly is because it uses things like patterns to make shortcuts.

So if something looks like it fits in, or pattern matches, then the unconscious mind can group, categorise and process the information together.

We learn these patterns and shortcuts from our own past experiences, from others' experiences through stories, from social and cultural norms and the way things are represented in the media.

When related to people, they're often based on the way a person appears - their age, the way they dress, their gender or race, or things like their accent and the way they speak, and just like in the movies, people are sometimes typecast, or stereotyped, according to the way they look and sound.

These unconscious influences, however, can lead to poor, or biased decision making. And here's an example.

A study asked staff in science faculties to review and rate a job application. Some of the staff received the application with a female first name, and some with a male first name - but apart from that, the applications were identical.

This is what they found. The male candidate was rated as better qualified, more likely to be hired, be offered a higher starting salary and be given better development opportunities.

The assessments were carried out by both men and women and the bias was independent of their gender, scientific discipline and age, which led the researchers to the conclusion that 'the bias was unintentional and generated from widespread cultural stereotypes rather than a conscious intention to harm women'.

In the workplace, unconscious biases can occur in everyday activities such as who keeps the notes in meetings, but they're also seen in recruitment and selection, performance reviews, who gets promoted, who's assigned to which tasks, and who's offered training, or mentoring opportunities.

These biases are often very small and only show after multiple decisions are made over a period of time.

A computer simulation can show how this works as you can isolate and show the impact of a small bias, without there being any other variables.

In a simulation which was designed to show this, a company had eight levels from entry to senior management. At the entry level there were 500 employees and at the top there were 10.

The employees were divided into two groups, A and B, and all levels had an equal number of As and Bs.

In each cycle of the simulation 15% of the staff from each level left the organisation, and they were replaced by the top performers from the level immediately below.

The top performers were decided by a performance review score which was a randomly generated number from 1 to 101 for group A, and from 1 to 100 for group B. So group A had a 1% advantage.

The simulation was run until all the original employees had left and been replaced. It showed that over time, and with only a very small amount of bias, there was a significant difference between the two groups, particularly at the top of the organisation.

So what can be done to remove or diminish these biases from the decision making process?

Here are some examples of what organisations are doing.

Certain words tend to be associated with different genders.

Look at these two phrases:

Your job is to develop a killer app,
Work with vendors to nurture existing partnerships

In these examples, 'killer' is seen as male coded and 'nurture' as female coded.

In other words, the suggestion is that there's a subtle message as to which gender employee the employer is looking for.

You can check for gender coding online to make sure that language, especially in things like job advertisements, avoids any of these subtlety biased messages.

Another thing that many organisations are doing is using standardised application forms instead of CVs.

They can then separate information such as the applicant's name and address, which as we've seen could lead to biases, so that the people assessing the application don't see them.

It's a bit like the idea of blind auditions for singers and musicians – candidates are selected because of the qualities they demonstrate and nothing else.

In the workplace these qualities are set out in the job description and these are then matched with the applicant's abilities both when assessing the application form, and during any interview.

Matching criteria is also used for things like promotions and training opportunities to help the person making the selection be as objective as possible.

When someone's in a hurry or under pressure, they can often lean more heavily on their unconscious mind for shortcuts to help them make decisions quickly.

To counteract this, slowing down to avoid making hasty decisions can lead to more considered, and potentially less biased, decision making.

Taking time to reflect, or making sure you can justify your decision, doesn't mean that your original idea or thought was wrong. It's more a case of suspending judgement until you're able to make a more fully informed decision.

One of the real difficulties with unconscious, or implicit biases, is of course that we're not aware that we have them. It's almost as though they're invisible. Others, however, might be able to see situations in a different light and make the invisible – visible.

Creating an environment where it is OK to call out when you think something might be biased, or asking someone to give their reasons for a decision, isn't necessarily easy, but it can be one of the most effective ways of learning about and reducing bias.

On a compass the needle points to magnetic north, which is a few degrees away from true north, and just like magnetic north, unconscious biases can point us slightly off course. Navigators make adjustments for this, and by being aware of possible unconscious biases we can also make adjustments.

It won't mean that we always make the right decisions, but it can help us to make them based on the best information available.