

National Alumni Scholarship

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What is implicit bias in an evaluation process?

Unconscious biases have a critical and "problematic" effect on our judgment, says Francesca Gino, professor at Harvard Business School. "They cause us to make decisions in favor of one person or group to the detriment of others."

A wealth of research has shown that biases lead to disproportionate opportunities for people of color, women, and people from other marginalized identities. For example, applicants named Latisha and Jamal do not get the same number of callbacks in an interview process as Emily and Greg.

Part of combating bias in an evaluation, interview, and application process includes being aware of biases that exists. Please study the following common biases, and brainstorm ways in which you will combat them when participating in the NAS process:

Experience bias: We privilege what seems most obvious to us, based on what we already know. This means we might miss information that could enhance our perception of an applicant's experience.

Distance bias: We're most likely to value what is closest to us, in terms of both space and time. That means people may place more emphasis on an applicant's most recent achievements and less emphasis on what she accomplished earlier in the review period, which can skew results.

Similarity bias: We tend to value the contributions of those who are most like us, which means a reviewer may not always notice the strengths of people who are different from them. Thus, similarity bias can limit opportunities for women and people of color when their reviewer does not relate to them as strongly, for example.

Confirmatory bias: A reviewer is more likely to see evidence that affirms their existing beliefs about an applicant. This is very similar to the halo effect: when an applicant excels in one component of the process, the reviewer is more likely to see them as excelling in all aspects of the process.

Likeability bias: It is natural to gravitate toward people with whom you instantly get along with. Studies have found that that impressions made in the first 10 seconds of an interview could impact the interview's outcome. Other studies suggest that employers hire people that they like the most on a personal level. Bias toward natural chemistry or common interests is another one to watch out for in the evaluation process.