

CEP Magazine – February 2024



Michael Bret Hood (21puzzles@gmail.com) is Director of 21st Century Learning & Consulting LLC in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, USA.

How implicit bias affects hiring and team decision-making

By Michael Bret Hood

Have you ever made an immediate connection with someone you just met, only to spend another 10 minutes with them and wonder: what you were thinking? What about the opposite? Initial impressions are part of being a human being. Because of how your brain works, you can't always stop these impressions and feelings from affecting your decision-making.

Stereotypes—also known as mental schemas or mental shortcuts—have been essential tools that have enabled humans to survive. When you smell smoke emanating from a room, your brain senses the danger even before you confirm any threat. Things such as how you were raised, your belief systems, your culture, and other personal experiences have created a unique set of file folders in your brain, which filter and process the information and stimuli around you. However, the brain's perception and processes aren't always as accurate as you wish.

Drifting toward stereotypes

Hiring is an important function for any organization. Most compliance leaders strive to find a diverse cadre of qualified and talented employees, but unconscious biases can inadvertently interfere with that process. Let's do a quick exercise. Read the following words and register the first image that pops into your brain.

- Nurse
- Computer programmer
- Librarian
- Welder

Did images of women flow into your brain when you read nurse and librarian? Did images of men dominate your thoughts when you read computer programmer and welder? If so, you are not alone, as people have been conditioned to associate these professions with particular genders. In the case of nurses, the stereotype could be justified, as almost 9 out of 10 registered nurses, on average, are female.^[1] In contrast, women make up approximately 5% of welders in the workforce.^[2] When you make hiring decisions, these expectations and social constructs can threaten impartiality by causing you to unconsciously dismiss a qualified candidate simply because they did not fit your preconceived notions of who might be best for the position.

In a study performed by University of Pennsylvania Wharton School professors Judd Kessler and Corinne Low and doctoral student Colin D. Sullivan, women or minority candidates applying for a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) position with a 4.0 grade point average (GPA) were treated similarly to

white male candidates who had obtained a 3.75 GPA.^[3] It's not that individuals purposely seek to discount qualified candidates, but rather, it is difficult to recognize when your unconscious brain interferes. "One reason for continued lack of diversity is that even if equally qualified candidates from diverse backgrounds apply for job openings, recruiters, because of implicit biases, gravitate toward candidates with identities that fit a stereotype."^[4] While some people actively discriminate against certain classes of individuals, many people fall victim to unconscious rationalizations such as describing the chosen candidate as being a better "culture fit" over a comparably qualified candidate who didn't meet stereotypical associations.

This document is only available to members. Please log in or become a member.

[Become a Member](#) [Login](#)