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Minimizing and addressing implicit bias in the workplace

Be proactive, part one

Librarians and information professionals cannot hide from bias: a prejudice for or against something, someone, or a group. As human beings, we all have biases. However, implicit biases are ones that affect us in an unconscious manner. Awareness of our implicit biases, and how they can affect our colleagues and work environment, is critical to promoting an inclusive work environment. Part one of this two-part article series will focus on implicit bias: what is implicit bias, how these biases affect the work environment, and best practices for reducing these biases within recruitment, hiring, and retention in the library workplace.

Implicit bias

Medical research has revealed that implicit bias is found throughout the brain.^{1,2} Bias is found in the amygdala, which is also associated with fear or the “fight or flight” notion. Basic information about individuals and social stereotypes are stored in the temporal lobes. First impressions, empathy, and reasoning are associated with the frontal cortex.³ Acknowledging that we all have biases is the first step towards reducing our reliance on generalizations or stereotypes.

Implicit biases are different from explicit biases in that with explicit bias, one may or may not choose to reveal the bias. However, implicit biases are deeply rooted in our subconscious and are hence difficult to access. This is what makes these biases more difficult to address with awareness alone. Thus when thinking about implicit biases, the

question we need to ask ourselves is What are my biases? in order to start taking steps to mitigate them.

What is implicit bias?

Implicit (unconscious) biases are “attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.”⁴ Meaning we are not even aware that they are occurring. These biases are prevalent and permeate throughout the workplace at all levels. Within our library and information centers, biases can impact diversity efforts, recruiting, and retention, and unknowingly form an institution’s culture. They may not necessarily align with our own declared beliefs; however, they are malleable so we can unlearn them.⁵

If you were to view an image of a person or even that first impression when you first meet someone, do you find yourself making any negative connotations? It is very easy to quickly make judgments about others simply based on appearance. Understanding what motivated that judgment or bias is an opportunity to learn more about yourself and learn how these judgments may impact your colleagues and workplace.

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Project Implicit, a nonprofit organization, is a collaboration between researchers who are interested in implicit social cognition (otherwise known as implicit bias). They offer an Implicit Association Test (IAT) to measure attitudes and beliefs that people may be unwilling or unable to report. This test may reveal that you have an implicit attitude that you did not even know you had.⁶

How do implicit biases affect the workplace?

Twenty percent of large U.S. companies provide implicit bias trainings to their employees, and 50% of large U.S. companies will offer it over the next five years.⁷ Most recently, Starbucks closed all of its stores to have mandatory racial bias training for its employees.⁸

There are more than 150 cognitive biases with five that have direct impacts within the workplace:

- **Affinity bias.** It is human nature to gravitate towards individuals who look like us, therefore, we prefer people who look like us.
- **Halo effect.** The tendency to think everything about a person is good because you like that person.
- **Perception bias.** The tendency to form stereotypes and assumptions about certain groups that make it impossible to make an objective judgement about members of those groups.
- **Confirmation bias.** The tendency for people to seek information that confirms pre-existing beliefs or assumptions.
- **Group think.** This bias occurs when people try too hard to fit into a particular group by mimicking others or holding back thoughts and opinions. This causes them to lose part of their own identities and causes organizations to lose out on creativity and innovation.⁹

Bias influences decisions at all levels of an organization. In one study, law firms were given a fictitious legal memo that included grammatical, factual, and technical analysis

errors. When the memo was perceived to have been written by a Black author, law firm partners found more of the errors and rated the memo as lower in quality than when the author was perceived to be White. Other studies have shown that tall men have a career advantage in leadership positions, overweight employees are given lower performance evaluations, and people are treated differently because of their clothing.¹⁰ When bias are not addressed, they can affect 1) working relationships and trust, 2) diverse talent recruitment, 3) work productivity, 4) promotion and professional development, and 5) creativity and innovation in the workplace.

Changing the culture at your institution

On May 11, 2018, we were invited to present at the Symposium for Strategic Leadership in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, hosted by Association for Research Libraries and ACRL. During our presentation, we asked attendees to collaborate and develop best practices to reduce implicit biases in two phases of employment: recruitment/hiring and retention. Below we are sharing these suggestions with you.

Recruiting

Recruitment and hiring play a critical role in recruiting diverse talent and often provide the first impression of a company's culture. Simply placing the standard Equal Employment Opportunity diversity statement at the bottom of a job listing is not enough. Here are some suggestions to reduce bias in your recruitment efforts and hiring practices.

- **Include a diversity statement.** Every organization should have a diversity statement or a mission statement that includes a clear commitment to diversity. To complement the application, you could ask applicants to write a diversity statement highlighting how the individual plans to contribute to diversity in teaching, research, and service.

- **Vet your job postings for suggestive language.** Using extreme or masculine words

or requirements that are unnecessarily steep or vague can detract diverse candidates by lowering the perception that they would belong in the organization.¹¹ You should have a diversity specialist review your job listings and interview questions for bias language. If you do not have a diversity specialist at your institution, you should invest in tools, such as Textio, that provide augmented writing for job listings.¹²

- **Widen the net when recruiting.**

Tap into existing professional associations, caucuses, and listservs that organize diverse communities. Also, call diverse colleagues and ask for recommendations. Reach out to people personally, and encourage them to apply. That personal touch can make a world of difference.

Hiring

Strip certain identifiers from applications. A study found that Whites receive 50% more calls for interviews than Black job candidates with the exact same resumes. The only difference was the candidate's name. Some companies delete any identifiers (i.e., names) from resumes before reviewing them.¹³

- **Script your interviews.** Interviewers naturally create a warmer or more casual climate for candidates with whom they share similar experiences—say those who went to the same university or were in the same fraternity. This natural instinct can advantage certain groups by making them feel more comfortable.¹⁴ To avoid this, set predetermined interview questions, and pay attention to the setting to ensure a level playing field for all candidates.¹⁵ Also, create a rubric to score candidates' responses to each question on a predetermined scale.

- **Diversify the search committee.** Every search committee should include members from underrepresented groups. If you do not have a librarian of color, ask a paraprofessional or a faculty member of color to serve on the committee. Your search committee should also consist of members from all positions at your institutions.

- **Institute a “Rooney Rule.”** The Rooney Rule is a National Football League policy that requires league teams to interview ethnic-minority candidates for head coaching and senior football operation jobs. When Intel started requiring its managers to interview a diverse slate of candidates, they saw the percentage of new hires from underrepresented groups increase from 31.9% to 45.1%.¹⁶

- **Create clear compensation policies.**

People of color and women are underpaid compared to their White male colleagues in the same position. Salary surveys should be conducted annually to assess inequalities in pay and create clear salary bands/tiers with defined expectations. Decide whether, and how, to allow compensation negotiations. Women are judged more harshly than men when they negotiate; therefore, women tend to negotiate less. To combat this, some organizations have instituted a no-negotiation policy to avoid bias.¹⁷

Retention

Once we acquire a diverse workplace, our efforts to reduce bias do not end there. We must support the unique needs of all of our employees and continuously assess the equity and inclusiveness of our policies and practices. Below are a few suggestions to promote equity in the workplace culture.

- **Cultural awareness training.** In order to understand and appreciate our colleagues, we have to be culturally competent. Cultural awareness training should give employees a safe place to learn about unconscious bias, how to recognize their own biases, and how to develop practices to reduce bias in everyday decision making.

- **Create an inclusive work environment.** Bias is not limited to what someone says or does, but it can exist in the physical workspace. In order to flourish, individuals need to feel like they are welcomed into a space. Make sure your website, library displays, and décor (portraits) are representative of your staff and your patrons.

- **Mentoring programs.** Companies with formal mentorship programs see the

representation of minorities increase by 9% to 24%.¹⁸ Mentors naturally “want their mentees to succeed, regardless of demographics. For underrepresented groups, it is common to feel alone and question whether you “belong” in a predominately White profession. A mentor can help you feel supported and serve as a sounding board when issues arises.

- **Promotions.** Establish clear criteria for promotions in advance to reduce biases in the decision-making process. You may have to find creative opportunities for advancement by restructuring your organization with equity in mind. If there is no room for growth at your organization, you can offer professional development through mentorships, shadowing, or internships.

- **Assess, assess, assess.** Survey employees confidentially to find out what is really going on in every aspect of the employment process—from pre-screening resumes to hiring to promotion to career opportunities, through compensation and engagement and development as well as the performance management process.¹⁹ Talk with current employees, particularly women and minorities, to ask them what biases they have witnessed in the organization and the effects these have had on their careers.²⁰

Conclusion

Libraries are such a great place to work, and often serve as a safe space for our patrons. In an effort to reduce bias and promote inclusivity, we hope that you will implement some of these best practices at your institution. In the November issue, part two of our series will offer suggestions to deal with microaggressions in the workplace.

Notes

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5. “Understanding Implicit Bias,” The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, 2015, accessed July 8, 2018, <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/>.

6. “Project Implicit,” 2011, <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/education.html>, accessed July 8, 2018.

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positively impacts their academic success and student experience in the SSS program.

Academic libraries today are often approached by campus or university administrators in search of space for new projects, and library deans and directors must fight to maintain control over the limited space in their buildings. At Miami University-Hamilton, library staff believed that students would be best served by a partnership with the TRiO SSS program and advocated to bring this program into the library's space. This collaborative effort to improve retention and increase student success emphasized the library's role as a valuable and relevant student resource to the entire campus community.

Notes

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