

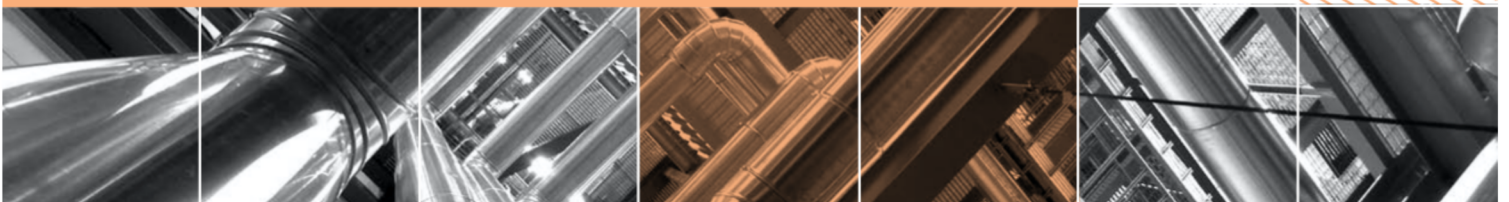


**Professionals  
Australia**  
Gender and Diversity

# UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

WHAT IS IT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT  
IN THE STEM CONTEXT?

By Mark Toner



# Whenever gender issues in the workplace are discussed, someone will invariably attribute the problems which arise to unconscious bias. So what is unconscious bias and how does it affect us?

Let's take a common situation: one female candidate and three to four male candidates being interviewed for recruitment by an organisation. Let's assume there are three interviewers, with one female amongst them, although in male-dominated businesses, the interviewers will often all be male. The interviewers will generally try to be fair and treat all applicants equally, but they will probably be unaware of the following biases which can affect their interviewing behaviour and subsequent decision-making about the suitability of each applicant:

- in-group bias, which causes us to be more comfortable with and favour people like us, i.e. of the same skin colour, gender, background, experience, interests or personality type
- the halo effect, which causes us to allow the physical characteristics of others to affect our judgement of their other qualities, e.g. physically attractive people are more trustworthy
- anchoring bias, which causes us to rely too much on an irrelevant piece of data or belief, e.g. one of the interviewers had previously hired a women and it turned out badly
- confirmation bias, which causes us to notice data and information which conforms with our beliefs and to disregard any which doesn't
- availability bias, which causes us to grab readily available data to make decisions rather than use all available and relevant data which will take more effort and time to analyse
- bandwagon effect, which causes us to believe or do things because other people believe or do the same
- minority pool bias, which causes interviewers to evaluate more negatively applicants who comprise a minority of the applicant pool
- social comparison effect, which causes interviewers to favour candidates who don't compete with their own particular strengths.

So the single female applicant starts out with an initial disadvantage of having the minority gender amongst the applicants. When interviewed, the male interviewers may see the male applicants as members of their in-group and favour them consciously or unconsciously, and they may see the female applicant as a member of their out-group with characteristics similar to the other women in business they know, which could be negative. The other biases listed above can further confuse their judgement of the most appropriate applicant and there are many other types of cognitive bias which could also affect the interviewers' decisions.

The above factors can also be present in performance appraisals, promotions and other decisions about people. So organisations need to examine at a detailed level not just their written policies and procedures but their current practices in the hiring, performance review and promotion of staff, and provide appropriate training to mitigate bias and to explain the gender and other diversity issues involved.