

Hiding in plain sight

Tips to disrupt unconscious biases that could be limiting your hiring choices



The difference between conscious and unconscious bias

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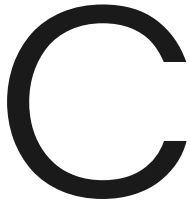
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Chances are, you've heard of biases, the stereotypes we all have (whether conscious or unconscious) that inform our decisions, including who we hire and promote. But do you recognize them in yourself? Or in your hiring managers? Do they see them?

As HR professionals, our goal is always to be open-minded and inclusive. So, you might be thinking, "I've heard about biases, but I don't have any." The truth is, everyone has them.

And while they don't necessarily make us bad people (they're part of being human, after all), they can lead us to make poor decisions. For example, overlooking the best person for the job.

In fact, the NeuroLeadership Institute says, "If you have a brain, you have bias."

That's why we're creating anti-bias training for our entire Altis team.

To help us source the best, most qualified candidates for our clients, everyone in a recruitment seat will be learning the following:

- > What's the difference between conscious and unconscious bias?
- > Why is it important to challenge unconscious bias in the workplace?
- > What are the most common types of unconscious bias?
- > How can we disrupt unconscious bias in recruiting?

And since our goal is to help employers across Canada create workplaces where everyone can thrive, we wanted to share our key takeaways with you here.



What's the difference between conscious and unconscious bias?

We pick up biases, both conscious and unconscious, during our lives through interactions with others at work and in society, childhood messages and from the media.

Just think, who does the dishes on TV? Always mom, right? Exactly.

Historically, these biases helped us make automatic or snap decisions about people or situations, sometimes for survival. But today, they can automatically shut people out of jobs, housing, education—real impacts on real lives.

And AI can make it worse because algorithms trained on biased data repeat stereotypes. For example, that doctors are white men, and criminals are racialized men.

Conscious biases

(Also called explicit biases) These are beliefs or stereotypes that we're aware of and act on intentionally. Example: We might consciously dismiss older people as slow and set in their ways.

Unconscious biases

(Also called implicit biases) These are the beliefs or stereotypes that run quietly in the background, making them harder to recognize. Example: Maybe we were taught as kids not to trust people from a certain ethnic group and carry this stereotype unconsciously as an adult.

How can bias show up in real life?

In the workplace:

Around 30% of Fortune 500 CEOs are men over 6'2" — and yet only 4% of American men are that tall. Are taller people better leaders or is bias at play?

In education:

Studies have found that Black students are reprimanded or suspended more often than white students for the same behaviour.

In parenting:

Researchers have found some parents expect sons to do better in math than daughters—leading many girls to believe they're just "not math people," perpetuating the lack of women in STEM.

Just because a bias is unconscious doesn't mean we can ignore it. That's why we're calling our training "anti-bias" because our goal isn't just to see bias—it's to openly challenge it.



Why is it important to challenge unconscious bias in the workplace?

Many people face subtle forms of bias at work, as well as in school, housing, policing or while navigating daily life. These collective biases add up, and over time, they disadvantage individuals and entire groups.

Think about that: It's a lot of responsibility.

In HR and in recruitment, our thoughts (biases) have the power to change someone's career trajectory and future.

This is why we need to actively work to recognize and challenge our biases.

Here's how they show up in the workplace:

In hiring

Unconscious bias may favour certain "default" candidates and overlook others from underrepresented groups. Even one missed job opportunity can result in prolonged lost income, slower career progression, mental and physical challenges, fewer housing options and even less opportunities for their children.

In the workplace

Biased decisions can impact promotions, pay and performance reviews. For example, some people might be promoted again and again, helping them leapfrog over others to climb the ladder faster.



What's the difference between bias and discrimination?

It's subtle. Bias is the thought; discrimination is the resulting action.

Example:

A biased belief that someone from a particular group is less competent can lead to discrimination in hiring or promotion.

Discrimination and the law

Aside from the moral obligation to treat everyone fairly and equally, there is a legal requirement to do so as well.

In Canada, two important pieces of legislation protect people from being discriminated against:

> **The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states:**

“Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination...”

> **The Human Rights Act of 1998** includes rights related to **Equality**, which is **critical in our work as HR leaders and hiring managers**. Under this law, we all have equal rights regardless of our “race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, family status, genetic characteristics, disability or conviction for an offence for which a pardon has been granted or in respect of which a record suspension has been ordered.” [Read the Act here.](#)

Every person in Canada has a shared responsibility to bring this Act to life.

Important:

As employers and business leaders, it’s vital that we know this legislation and avoid any interactions or conversations that could be perceived as discriminatory based on any of these protected grounds.

Avoid: “Where are you from?” – especially in the workplace

While it might seem like an innocent question, it implies you think the person isn’t truly “from here.”

Since “national or ethnic origin” is a protected ground under the Human Rights Act, asking a candidate or employee this question (or “Are you Canadian?”) can have serious consequences for employers, and should be avoided.

Ask candidates instead:

“Are you legally entitled to work in Canada?”

Watch:

[This video](#) shows the pitfalls of this question.



What are the most common types of unconscious bias?

There are many types of unconscious bias, but in our training, we're focusing on the ones that most commonly show up in the workplace.

Note:

Biases can overlap. For example, someone might unconsciously favour younger white people—reflecting age, racial and affinity bias all at once. This layering can make individual biases harder to spot because they're often intertwined.

1. Affinity bias (aka “Like Me” bias or “unconscious favouritism”):

The most common bias in the workplace, Affinity bias comes from our natural instinct to surround ourselves by people just like us—whether in their background, beliefs, interests, age, experience or appearance.

How it can show up at work:

In hiring

Hiring decisions can favour those who look, think or act like you.

For example:

“That candidate was so bubbly and outgoing—just like our team!” or “He plays golf, he must be a very disciplined guy!”

Collaboration

Affinity bias can create an “us versus them” mentality resulting in those who are different not being heard.

Performance reviews

Managers may rate higher employees who share similar attributes or experiences with themselves, even if their overall performance is the same or less than that of others.

Racial bias in Canada

- > Did you know that in 2022, Indigenous employees across Canada earned an average of only **\$0.91** for every dollar earned by non-Indigenous employees? That's right, they earned 9% less. Read more [here](#).
- > While women make up **51%** of our population, they hold only **40%** of senior management roles. And for **Black women**, who make up 2.2% of our population, it's even worse. In 2024, Black women **held only 0.8% of senior management roles in Canada**. Read more [here](#).

Challenge yourself:

- > Are you listening only to people who are like you?
- > Are you consciously favouring candidates just like you?
- > Are you rating team members like you higher?

2. Racial bias: It's often subtle, systemic and operates more quietly. It shows up in assumptions, patterns of preference and unequal access to opportunity.

How it can show up at work:

In hiring

A hiring manager might assume a candidate with a foreign-sounding name isn't as qualified, without realizing they're making that assumption.

Promotions

A supervisor may consistently give more leadership opportunities to employees who "seem more professional," unconsciously linking that idea to Western norms of appearance and communication.

Access to opportunities

A manager might overlook a Black employee for mentorship, assuming they're "not the right fit," and thus, blocking their path to advancement.



Challenge yourself:

- > Are you making assumptions based on someone's name, accent, appearance or background?
- > Would you feel or act differently if this person were from a different racial or cultural group?
- > Have you examined your hiring criteria through an inclusive lens?



3. Ability/Disability bias: There are many kinds of abilities and disabilities—physical, mental, emotional, intellectual, pain-related—and not all of them are visible or immediately apparent.

Many people have more than one type of disability. In Canada, of the working-age adults who report a disability, 36% were likely to have two or three disability types. Ability or disability bias has a measurable impact on employment, earning potential and long-term success. For example, in 2022, 62% of working-age adults with disabilities in Canada were employed, compared with 78% of those without disabilities.

How it can show up at work:

In hiring

We might judge a qualified candidate who discloses a mental health condition as “unstable” and not give them the job.

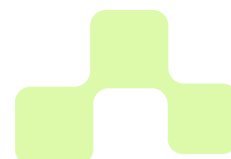
Promotions

We might assume someone who requests a mental health leave from work is “unreliable,” even though good mental health is essential both at work and in life. Perhaps we overlook them for promotion.



Challenge yourself:

- > In your day-to-day work, are you limiting candidates who might be neurodivergent?
- > Have you discounted a candidate who has visible physical limitations?
- > If the job doesn't require physical ability, does it matter that the candidate is in a wheelchair or communicates through an assistive device?



4. Age bias: Also known as ageism, it refers to the tendency to make assumptions about someone's skills, work ethic, adaptability or value based on their age, whether they're perceived as too old or too young.

It can influence hiring decisions, promotional opportunities, leadership development and even the way individuals are treated on teams, in meetings or even at informal workplace gatherings. While often associated with older people, it affects people of all ages, albeit in different ways.



How it can show up at work:

In hiring

Older workers have lower callback rates on job applications than younger workers, receive fewer training opportunities and see themselves as less valuable when they're exposed to negative stereotypes. Read [more](#).

Younger workers, including Millennials and Gen Z, are often viewed as lacking loyalty, work ethic or readiness for leadership. Gen Z are routinely called lazy, even though 40% of Gen Z have TWO jobs. They might be excluded from strategic discussions, mentorship or promotions due to assumptions that they "need more time" or lack maturity.

Challenge yourself:

- > When mentoring, promoting or hiring, do you assume older employees are "slowing down," "set in their ways" or "not interested in learning new things"?
- > Do you assume younger ones need more "seasoning" before being given real responsibility?

5. Gender bias: It assumes someone is better or worse at something—or deserves different treatment—just because of their gender or gender expression, not their actual skills, interests or abilities.

While often associated with bias against women and gender-diverse individuals, it can also impact men—especially when they don't conform to traditional gender norms.

How it can show up at work:

Bias against women: Women who are equally qualified are promoted less often and paid less than men. In Canada, women make up 51% of the workforce but hold only 40% of senior management roles and a smaller percentage of executive roles. On average, women earn 87 cents for every dollar earned by men, with greater disparities for Indigenous women, racialized women and women with disabilities.

Bias against transgender and non-binary people:

They are twice as likely to be unemployed and report lower income levels than cisgender individuals, according to Statistics Canada.

Gender-inclusive language

To model inclusivity, use gender-inclusive language, such as:

- > "everyone" instead of "you guys"
- > "he/she or they" instead of "he"
- > "firefighter" instead of "fireman"
- > "server" instead of waiter or waitress
- > "flight attendant" instead of steward or stewardess

Challenge yourself:

- > Who gets described as a "natural leader"?
- > Who's encouraged to speak up, take charge or be visible?
- > Are leadership behaviours being judged through a gendered lens?
- > Who gets mentored in the workplace for growth? Are there patterns?
- > Who is given credit for great work being performed?



6. Beauty bias: Sometimes called Appearance bias, Body Size bias, “pretty privilege” or Height bias, is all about judging someone’s competence, abilities, knowledge and ambition based on their appearance.

Humans tend to favour people we think are conventionally attractive, and like other biases, this can affect hiring decisions, promotions and salary outcomes in Canada.

How it can show up at work:

Hiring and promotion

Height Bias is a tendency to associate taller individuals with traits like competence, confidence and leadership, regardless of their actual skills. The result? Taller candidates are more often selected for management jobs, which means they earn more money (a few hundred dollars more per year for every inch in height, according to one study). While there’s no direct link between height and performance, a 2022 Canadian HR case study found that senior executives in top firms were disproportionately male and taller than average.

Challenge yourself:

- Remember that ability and appearance are completely distinct.

Disrupt Beauty bias by having a phone

- interview. A virtual interview can also be less body-image-based, especially when it comes to body size or height.

- Use standardized interview questions to evaluate qualifications fairly.

Beauty standards vary according to someone’s ethnic or cultural

- background; so, a “professional” appearance can mean different things for different individuals.

Did you know?

In Canada, physical appearance is NOT one of the protected grounds under human rights legislation. So, while it’s not illegal to make hiring decisions based on appearance, this doesn’t mean we shouldn’t challenge Beauty bias at work.



How can we disrupt unconscious bias in recruiting and at work?

Whether you're a business leader, a manager, an HR professional, a recruiter or just someone who wants to do better, here's how to challenge unconscious bias at work using the **CLEAR framework**, which stands for:

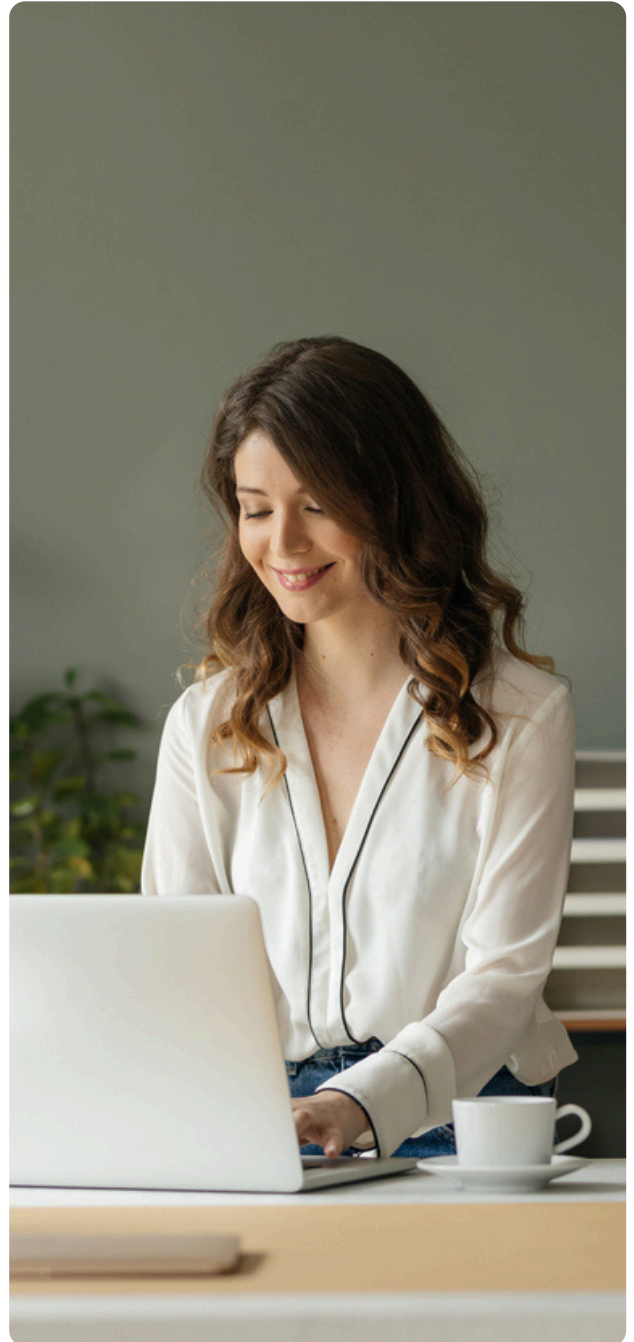
- C** heck yourself
- L** ook for patterns (or Language Matters)
- E** xpand the input (or Empathize)
- A** ct intentionally
- R** eflect and recalibrate

C heck Yourself because awareness is the first step toward change.

Here are some questions to ask yourself before any meeting, interview, performance review or decision:

- "What assumptions might I be bringing into this?"
- Do I feel a "gut reaction" to someone? Why?
- Am I assuming someone's abilities based on their age, name, or background?

Then, name the bias you suspect might be showing up (e.g., "Am I favouring this person because we went to the same school?" → Affinity bias).



L ook for Patterns: "Bias often hides in repetition." OR L – Language Matters: "Bias often hides in language."

Here are some questions to ask yourself to audit past decisions:

- Who have you tended to promote?
- Whose voices are you listening to in meetings?
- What type of candidates usually get through your hiring funnel?
- Are you being convinced to think a certain way?
- Who gets stretch assignments?
- What do your shortlists look like? Are they diverse in age, background, gender?
- Are you using similar language in every job ad, or does it subtly shift based on role?

Inclusive language to use

Gender-Neutral Terms

- > Use "everyone" instead of "guys."
- > Use "they/them" instead of assuming "he" or "she."

Cultural and Identity-Inclusive Terms

- > Use "global experience" instead of "Western experience."
- > Ask how someone self-identifies rather than assuming (e.g., "please share your pronouns").
- > Ask, "Will your partner be joining us for the company event?" instead of using boyfriend/girlfriend/husband/wife.

Accessible Language

- > Avoid using jargon, acronyms and complex language that may exclude people with different learning styles or neurodiversity.
- > Avoid jargon and acronyms that are only known to a small, local group of people or known only by age (e.g., BRB, WDYT).



E

xpand the Input: "More perspectives, fewer blind spots." OR Empathy/Empathize because we make better decisions when more voices are in the room.

Here's how to Expand Input:

- Use structured interviews with consistent questions.
- Include diverse panels for interviews and performance reviews. Try blind voting about a candidate so as not to convince someone else to conform to one person's opinions.
- Use blind hiring techniques where possible (e.g., anonymized resumes).
- Do voice/telephone interviews that are not visual for your first meeting to help you make an assessment without being affected by visuals.
- Test using inclusive language in job descriptions (tools like Textio help).
- When you're hiring and realize your top three picks all share a similar background, pause. Go back and widen the search—tap different networks.





Act Intentionally: "Default settings often reflect old biases. So reset them."

Once you've checked your mindset, looked for patterns and widened the lens, the next step is to take deliberate actions to counter bias.

Here are some of the ways to Act Intentionally in your day-to-day work:

In Everyday Work

- > Rotate who speaks first in meetings.
- > Don't always rely on the loudest voice—ask quiet team members for input directly.
- > Take notes during performance reviews to avoid the halo or horns effect—when one positive or negative trait unfairly influences your entire perception of a person.

In Hiring

- > Score interviews using a rubric that ties directly to job requirements.
- > Challenge yourself if you hear phrases like:
 - "They just felt like a good fit." → Ask: What does "fit" mean? Is it based on skills or similarity?
 - "They remind me of myself when I started."

In Learning

- > Challenge your biases through learning.
- > Join webinars, read articles and take part in conversations that challenge your viewpoint and the stereotypes you may hold.
- > Take the time to learn about different cultures, perspectives, personalities and experiences.



Reflect and Recalibrate: "Bias work is ongoing work."

Bias doesn't disappear after one workshop or checklist. It's something we have to revisit, rethink and refine over time.

So, ask yourself and your team members (monthly or quarterly):

- Where might I have let bias in recently?
- What surprised me in a recent hiring or review process?
- Did we overlook a candidate because of an intangible?
- Whose perspective haven't I heard enough?

Further reading

Everyone has unconscious biases – here's how to identify, address, and overcome them.

Click here: [Business Insider, Kelly Burch, March 2022.](#)

The scope and limits of implicit bias training: An experimental study with Swedish social workers.

Click here: [Sage Journals, Moa Bursell, March 2024.](#)

Think leader, think man? The role of implicit bias, status-legitimizing beliefs, and gender in hospitality leadership discrimination.

Click here: [Science Direct, Michelle Russen, Mary Dawson b, Juan M. Madera, February 2025.](#)

Want to test your own bias?

Harvard University has developed a series of free tests that allow you to assess your implicit (or unconscious) biases, highlighting how they may influence your beliefs, actions, decisions and attitudes.

In HR circles, you may hear them called IAT, which stands for [Implicit Association Tests](#).

Each test covers a different type of bias, such as age, race, religion, weight, etc. and takes about 10 minutes to complete.

Here's how to test yourself

1. Click [\[here\]](#).
2. Participate as a guest by selecting 'Canada' from the drop-down menu (no need to enter your email address).
3. Click [Go](#).
4. Select your preferred language.
5. At the bottom of the page, click "[I wish to proceed.](#)"
6. Select your preferred test.



Conclusion

At the end of the day, bias isn't just a concept we talk about in training—it's something that shows up in our daily decisions, often without us even realizing it. But here's the good news: once we start noticing it, we can start changing it.

Whether you're reviewing resumes, leading a meeting or choosing who to mentor, every moment is an opportunity to widen the lens and challenge old assumptions. This work isn't about being perfect—it's about being aware, being intentional and being open to doing better.

Let's keep asking the hard questions, listening to diverse voices and pushing for a workplace where everyone gets a fair shot. Because when we do, everyone wins.

If you'd like to meet with us to discuss how to build your own training, please email HRtopics@altis.com.





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