



## Unconscious bias concerning people with disabilities

### Definition

Over the last few decades' new research from the fields of neuroscience and social psychology has shed light onto the working of the human brain and the concept of unconscious bias. Unconscious biases are simply our unintentional people preferences, which are created and maintained by the way our brains work, to sort data quickly and are influenced by our upbringing, the media and our life experiences.

The Employers Network for Equality and Inclusion (enei) have worked with employers for some time to understand and mitigate against the impact of unconscious bias in the workplace and in doing so spotted a worrying trend: Unconscious bias against disabled people appeared to be higher than any other social group.

### The Issues

Some 20% of the UK population has some form of disability:

- Some disabilities are caused by genetic factors, e.g. lack of sight, speech, hearing, dyslexia, autism.
- Some disabilities are invisible, including various forms of mental health.
- However, the majority of disabilities are acquired as a result of ageing or accident.

IT can play a major role in alleviating the effects of disability and allow independent living by enabling

- The blind and vision impaired to see
- The deaf and hard of hearing to listen
- The mute to speak
- The physically disabled to control their environment
- Those with cognitive impairments to understand better.

For evidence, ask Professor Stephen Hawking, and his reply will be mediated from his smart wheelchair through a computer system.

In a world of 'digital by default' knowledge of disability and the beneficial influence of IT should be part of the background knowledge of all IT professionals.

Unfortunately the unconscious bias concerning people with disability is stronger than that measured for gender and ethnic diversity. A recent survey, by The Employers' Network for Equality and Inclusion, showed that:

- 34.1% of those surveyed had a bias in favour of non disabled people over disabled people.
- 16% of those surveyed had a bias in favour of white people over black people.



- 2.6% of those surveyed had a bias in favour of men over women.

The same survey shows that 67% of the British public feel uncomfortable talking to people with disability and 36% believe disabled people are not as productive as everybody else<sup>1</sup>.

## The Recommendations

The Employers' Network for Equality and Inclusion recommends that managers setting up an Unconscious Bias programme to include disability should include the following key action points<sup>2</sup>:

- Measure the levels of unconscious bias of recruiters and key decision makers to raise awareness of bias.
- Encourage recruiters to put forward more candidates with disabilities to break down stereotypes and build more role models.
- Review positive action programmes and the process for agreeing reasonable adjustments.
- Review the impact of disability initiatives such as 'two ticks' and the 'Disability Confident Campaign' to ensure they are producing long term and lasting effects on the experiences of disabled people
- Use positive disabled role models to show the positive effect disabled people can have at work. Focus on their achievements at work and not on their disability
- Encourage honest discussions about disability in the workplace.
- Identify strengths of people with disabilities and play to them.
- Train line managers about different types of disabilities and how to talk to someone about their disability, giving them the confidence to have effective communication with different types of people.

## Authors

This position paper was developed by the BCS Digital Accessibility Specialist Group.

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1 See the report: <http://www.enei.org.uk/data/files/publications/734/Disability-A-Research-Study-on-Unconscious-Bias.pdf> for more information on these comparisons.

2 See [www.enei.org.uk/news.php/691/unconscious-bias-against-disabled-people-is-higher-now-than-before-the-paralympics](http://www.enei.org.uk/news.php/691/unconscious-bias-against-disabled-people-is-higher-now-than-before-the-paralympics)