

Let's Kick the Unconscious Bias Training (UBT) Addiction and Create Sustainable Diversity Instead

Executive Summary:

This article argues that unconscious bias training (UBT) is fundamentally flawed and a waste of money and resources. Through evaluating the evidence, we contend that UBT seems to: 1) raise awareness, but not change behaviour, 2) lack any sufficient evidence for its effectiveness, 3) have the potential to backfire, 4) be making no difference, despite substantial financial investment. Our assessment concludes by urging companies to focus resources on 'what to do' to implement sustainable diversity, rather than 'how not to think'.

Companies must invest in what works and be results-driven. And what works? For organisations it's CEOs taking ownership, plus targets and training for managers on 'how to build and lead teams and targets. For people of colour, it's sponsorship programmes, strategic networks, and access to role models, to name a few. This approach recognises the core structural and cultural barriers, which are proven to hold back women from all ethnicities and men of colour from advancing through the pipeline.

*

Introduction

In April 2018, two black men arrived early for a meeting at a Starbucks in Philadelphia. They sat at a table without ordering. Before long, some of the employees had called the police and the two men were arrested. The controversy sparked public outrage and prompted Starbucks to send employees from 8,000 US stores on a 4-hour unconscious bias training programme.

But is bias something that can be overcome in 4 hours?

The Pipeline is a diversity & inclusion specialist that undertakes extensive primary research each year to find the most effective ways for organisations to maximise their talent pool and create sustainable diversity. In this article we review the effectiveness of unconscious bias training (UBT).

Biases develop throughout our whole life. They are the build-up of socialised norms and thought patterns which are relentlessly fed to us from culture, society, the media, and our peers. This causes certain associations to become integral to our underlying psychology, attitudes, and behaviours. These biases are often divided into implicit biases (unconscious bias) or explicit biases (the biases and prejudices of which we are aware).

They are the cause of figures like this:

- In February 2020 we randomly sampled 200 senior female executives who had previously attended our programmes (our alumnae). 85% of respondents told us the leaders of their organisation tended to promote candidates who looked the same and were from similar backgrounds (The Pipeline, 2020).
- White job applicants are 74% more likely to have success than applicants from ethnic minority backgrounds with identical CVs (National Centre for Social Research, 2009).

The killing of George Floyd has prompted Black Lives Matter protests all over the world. In tandem, the Covid-19 pandemic is disproportionately impacting the BAME community, with the Office of National Statistics (ONS) finding that black people are 4 times more likely to die from the disease than white people (ONS, 2020).

Now is the time when all organisations must look in the mirror and ask themselves: why are so many talented people of colour not making it to the top of public, private, and third sector organisations?

In this article, we argue that companies should not waste time and resources on UBT. Billions of pounds have already been poured into UBT programmes, yet it has not improved outcomes. As Mike Noon, author of *Pointless Diversity Training: Unconscious Bias, New Racism and Agency*, puts it, these companies “*want to do something quickly without spending weeks on it, so they go for a two or three-hour unconscious bias session*” (quoted in WEF, 2018).

However, UBT is fundamentally flawed. It attempts to re-train our brain to suppress our implicit (and explicit) biases. Not an easy (or realistic) task within a 4-hour timeframe, or a 100-hour timeframe, for that matter. This view is well-supported. The EHRC (2018) say it is unlikely that UBT could ever completely eradicate implicit bias. The WEF (2018) quotes the CEO of hiring platform, *Applied*, Kate Glazebrook:

“[I]t’s hard to retrain the brain not to fall prey to the prejudices you have reinforced and trained for your entire life”

Not only this, but UBT focuses on ‘what not to think’, when really, companies should be concentrating on ‘what to do’ to create sustainable diversity. They can do this by understanding and tackling the core barriers which are proven to hold back women of all ethnicities and men of colour¹. To change the current landscape, we need to be led by the evidence of what works when it comes to knocking down these barriers.

This article outlines 5 reasons why we feel organisations need to ditch UBT:

1. Although UBT might **raise awareness**, there is **no evidence that it changes behaviour**.
2. There is a **lack of evidence for its effectiveness**.
3. However, there is evidence that UBT has the **potential to backfire**.
4. UBT, overall, **does not demonstrate good value for money**.
5. There are **many core barriers which UBT does not address**.

These insights are shaped by the evidence from our own quantitative analytics tool Genie™ which has now gathered over 3000 responses, our surveys, as well as the wider research².

1. Awareness vs. Behavioural Change

UBT is fundamentally flawed. It aims to increase awareness and in turn it hopes this change will lead to behavioural change (i.e. managers will become more inclusive). As such, it flies in the face of social and economic progress throughout history, where we know behaviours must change first and then attitudes follow.

A good example of this can be seen in the introduction of home working during the Covid-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, many leaders refused to endorse home working due to nervousness around productivity and reliable technology. The forced behavioural change of remote working due to lockdown restrictions, means that many leaders have now changed their minds and adopted a positive attitude to home working. In many cases, these new converts are leading the charge. Throughout May 2020, we surveyed around 50 Human Resources Directors (HRDs) and Chief People Officers in large corporations.

¹ In this article, going forward we refer to ‘all women and men of colour’, which intends to reference women from all ethnic backgrounds, and also men of colour.

² It should be noted that this research is all conducted in majority white societies.

Without exception, they all agreed that their CEOs had been wary of home working, but now embraced it. One HRD told us:

“Over the years, I’ve been talking to my CEO about home working and I couldn’t seem to change [their] mind. But during the pandemic [they’ve] become a convert” (FTSE retailer)

We consistently see this phenomenon of attitudinal changes following behavioural change. For example, the change to attitudes surrounding plastic waste after the charge on plastic bags was implemented (Thomas *et al.*, 2019; Poortinga *et al.*, 2016), the change to attitudes surrounding smoking after smoking bans were put in place (Cancer Research UK, 2017; Lykke *et al.*, 2014), and the change in attitudes towards sexual minorities and same-sex relationships as laws surrounding this have changed (Aksoy *et al.*, 2018).

But UBT continues to fly in the face of such research on ‘what works’. It attempts to change attitudes, and subsequently fails to change behaviours. The WEF (2018) concurs, writing that study after study shows that while training may raise awareness of prejudice, it does not change people’s behaviour. An academic meta-analysis of 260 studies with almost 30,000 adult participants, examines the effects of diversity training on cognitive learning, and found that there was no evidence that diversity training had any long-term effect on attitudes (Bezrukova *et al.*, 2016).

The EHRC also recognise that the evidence of behavioural change as an outcome of UBT is limited. While it can be effective for raising awareness, the effect on changing behaviour is limited:

“[W]e found no evidence to show that UBT can reduce bias to the extent that there is a ‘neutral’ preference” (EHRC, 2018: 17)

Each organisation has a different set of issues when it comes to bias, as Mike Noon points out. Knowing about biases does not automatically change behaviour, and it depends on the type of bias prevalent in each institution, argues Noon (2018).

2. Lack of Evidence for Effectiveness

There is a complete lack of evidence to suggest that UBT has any positive impact on organisational culture or long-term attitudes surrounding bias.

In 2018, a meta-analysis was conducted on 426 recent studies of anti-bias training. It used the implicit association test (IAT) before and after to assess whether unconscious bias can be affected by training. The analysis found weak immediate effects on implicit bias (Forscher *et al.*, 2018). Another review of nearly 1000 studies on anti-bias interventions also found little evidence for reduction of bias (Paluck and Green, 2009).

This is not only exhibited by the meta-analysis, but it is a view held by the employees participating in UBT themselves. Boston Consulting Group’s research with 20 of Australia’s largest organisations found that UBT programmes existed in 75% of companies. However, 1/3 of employees rated these programmes as ineffective, with half of them attributing this to poor implementation. Quite rightly, BCG recognises that this is not about ‘checking the box’ on UBT, but it is about making broader systematic changes to transform organisational culture (BCG, 2017: 7).

3. Potential for Backfire

Not only is there little evidence that UBT has a positive effect, but in fact, the evidence we do have suggests that UBT might actively backfire and make things worse (EHRC, 2018; WEF, 2018). UBT training could make employees feel:

- **Defensive.** As if they are being accused of being part of the problem.
- **Complacent.** They might think that if they have been through the training, their biases have been dealt with.
- **Defeated.** If biases are so pervasive then why are they trying to change them?

Not only could it backfire in these ways, but there is evidence that UBT could potentially augment existing biases.

Alexandra Kalev, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at Tel Aviv University researches the impact of UBT. Kalev's study of data from over 700 large US firms found that diversity training for managers was mandatory in 70% of firms. 5 years after instituting required training for managers, companies saw no improvement in the proportion of white women, black men, and Hispanics in management, and the share of black women actually decreased by 9% on average (Kalev *et al.*, 2006; Dobbin and Kalev, 2016).

We see also evidence of backfire in a study about ageism (Kulik, Perry and Bourhis, 2000). Participants were asked to watch one of three videos:

- A video that provided information about age and diversity, recommending they suppress age-related thoughts.
- A video that provided information about age, sex, racial and ethnic diversity, recommending that they try to suppress demography-related thoughts.
- A control video containing no suppression recommendations.

All participants then rated a series of job applications. Those participants who were 'cognitively busy' while rating candidates, and who had watched Video 1 (about suppressing age related biases) ended up evaluating older applicants less favourably. This suggests that instructions to suppress stereotypic thoughts could in fact have detrimental effects (Kulik *et al.*, 2000).

These studies indicate that, far from removing bias, UBT could, in fact, be counterproductive.

4. Value for Money?

UBT is costing companies a lot of money. In 2014, Google put \$114 million towards diversity training programmes, including putting over 60,000 employees through a 90-minute unconscious bias training programme (CNN, 2014). In 2017, a government review about race in the workplace recommended that the UK government create a free, online unconscious bias training resource. And in 2018, McKinsey estimated that, in the US alone, around \$8 billion was being pumped into diversity training and UBT annually (McKinsey, 2018).

Given the staggering amount of money being poured in to UBT, you would expect to see some sort of positive change. If the training worked, the numbers would surely be changing. But many organisations which have put employees and managers through the training have singularly failed to promote people of colour to senior levels or achieve a gender balance at leadership level.

Last year, our annual report, *Women Count*, found that in 2019, there were 6 female CEOs in the FTSE 100. This year, there are 4. We know that on the FTSE 100, the percentage of female executive directors is worryingly low at 10.9%. Out of the 297 female directors on FTSE 100 boards, only 32 of them (11%) are Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (Cranfield, 2019).

So why is so much money being pumped into UBT?

We're not really sure. In fact, we agree that, looking at the research, *"unconscious bias training is money ill-spent"* (WEF, 2018). As we have shown, UBT is not an effective way of tackling the core issues.

But if UBT is failing what does work?

5. Issues Missed by UBT

Unconscious bias does not equip organisational leaders and managers with the capability to lead and grow diverse teams. Whether rational or not, many senior white execs catastrophise and are terrified at the thought of being called racist and finding themselves on the wrong end of a grievance, so they find it easier to do and say nothing (The Pipeline, 2020)³. UBT does not measure or require future action. Neither does it build the confidence of managers and equip them with the skills to overcome some of the following problems faced every day at work by people of colour.

- **The Attainment Trap:** The attainment trap happens when men are appointed or promoted for potential and women for attainment. Almost 70% of our alumnae who we surveyed this year believe that this is the case in their organisation. The attainment trap stops women of potential from being promoted, thus limiting their presence in executive roles and committees, and blocking the emergence of future female CEOs.
- **Less Access to Sponsors and Strategic Networks:** Women are 19% more likely and men 23% more likely to get a promotion if they have a sponsor. However, men are 46% more likely than women to have a sponsor and Caucasians are 63% more likely than people of colour to have a sponsor (Hewlett, 2019). We also see that all women and men of colour are far less likely to have access to senior leaders and strategic networks (McKinsey, 2016). Our 2020 survey showed that 60% of our alumnae say that their organisations had not helped them to gain access to a sponsor or to a strategic network (The Pipeline, 2020). This means these they are missing out on someone telling them the unwritten rules and the stepping-stones in their organisation.
- **Lack of Feedback:** Our quantitative analytics tool, Genie™, shows that black colleagues are nearly twice as likely than white colleagues to strongly agree that they want more feedback (Genie™, The Pipeline). BAME women consistently report they see their managers begin to speak to them and then stop. One BAME woman said, *"It's not just about criticism I also see my manager stop half-way through paying me a compliment"*. When we analysed the feedback further still, it did not seem to cover development in role or for the next role. This is confirmed by Hewlett's research (2014), which found that Asian, Hispanic and African American employees are over twice as likely as Caucasian employees to say they're unsure on how to act on the feedback they're given. We have conducted extensive qualitative research with managers to investigate the lack of feedback given to all women and men of colour. Their overriding message is that they are fearful that they will cause offence and may even lead to their resignation or dismissal. One manager told us they were, *"genuinely worried about being accused of being a racist if I performance manage someone in my team who is BAME"*. McKinsey (2016) research found that 15% of managers are concerned about emotional breakdowns when giving feedback to women, in contrast to 6% who are concerned about the same thing when giving feedback to men.
- **Fewer Challenges:** Genie™ also shows that one fifth of women do not believe that men and women are equally given challenging projects at work, whereas only 8% of men say the same (Genie™, The Pipeline).

³ The Pipeline, 2020 - quantitative study carried out by GENIE Px - The Pipeline's digital tool on the barriers felt by senior white managers to increasing ethnic diversity in their teams.

- **Role models:** Genie™ shows us that all women and men of colour see fewer role models. We find that around 75% of men and women of colour disagreed that they have any role models in their organisation, and 50% of all women disagree that they have any role models in their organisation. In comparison, this falls to 36% all white men and reduces further still when we remove white men from working class families.
- **The Benefits of Diversity:** Organisations need to explain that diversity is not just an equality issue but also a productivity issue. Our Genie™ responses reveal that 2/3 of respondents say that their manager has never spoken to them about how diversity is good for business (Genie™, The Pipeline). Companies need to explain that difference is a strength. For example, we know that when teams have at least one member who reflects the gender of their end user, the entire team is more than twice as likely (61% vs. 25%) to report that they understand their target market (CTI, 2013). This year, our research into the FTSE 350 revealed that companies with 33% or more women on their executive committees have an average profit margin of 15.2%, whereas companies with no women on their executive committees have a 1.5% average profit margin. McKinsey's research also shows that companies in the top quartile for ethnic diversity on executive teams have a 59% likelihood that their financial performance will be above the national industry mean - a 33% increase compared to those in the bottom quartile for ethnic diversity on executive teams (McKinsey, 2019).

Conclusion

UBT is fundamentally flawed. It seeks to change attitudes, but research reveals that behavioural change needs to come first. UBT focuses on 'how not to think', but we need to instead be concentrating on 'what to do' to make a change.

In her book, *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*, Iris Bohnet argues that rather than trying to debias the individual, the focus should be on debiasing the company. The key to this, Bohnet says, is changing behaviour, not just mindsets. We need strategies to make companies and cultures fairer, not just to think differently (Bohnet, 2016).

Organisations need to kick the UBT addiction and commit to changing behaviour and structures in the long-term. Enough time and money have been wasted. Now organisations need to focus on what works. The things that work are: CEO leading the agenda and explaining the business benefits of diversity, boards holding the CEO accountable for change, targets, training for managers on how to lead and build diverse teams, and development for all women and men of colour so they too can gain the skills to navigate organisations and realise their full potential.

CONTACT THE PIPELINE

If you want to know more about our research on 'What Works', please contact Lorna Fitzsimons at The Pipeline:

lorna@execpipeline.com

0207 636 9002

References

- Aksoy, C.; Carpenter, C; De Haas, R; Tran, K (2018). Do Laws Shape Attitudes? Evidence from Same-Sex Relationship Recognition Policies in Europe. IZA Institute of Labor Economics. Available from: <http://ftp.iza.org/dp11743.pdf>
- BCG (2017). What's Working to Drive Gender Diversity in Leadership. Available from: https://image-src.bcg.com/Images/BCG-Whats-Working_tcm87-155374.pdf
- Bezrukova et al. (2016). A Meta-Analytical Integration of Over 40 Years of Research on Diversity Training Evaluation. The Scholarly Commons. Available from: <https://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1973&context=articles>
- Bohnet, Iris (2016). What Works: Gender Equality by Design. *Harvard University Press*.
- Cancer Research UK (2017). British Smokers down by 1.9 million since smoking ban. Science Daily. Available from: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/07/170701081722.htm>
- CIPD (2019). Diversity management that works: An evidence-based view. CIPD. Available from: https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/7926-diversity-and-inclusion-report-revised_tcm18-65334.pdf
- CNN (2015). Google commits \$150 million to diversity. Available from: <https://money.cnn.com/2015/05/06/technology/google-diversity-plan/>
- Cranfield Report (2019). *The FTSE Board Report 2019*. Cranfield University. Available from: <https://www.cranfield.ac.uk/som/expertise/changing-world-of-work/gender-and-leadership/female-ftse-index>
- CTI (2013). Innovation, Diversity and Market Growth. Available from: <https://www.talentinnovation.org/publication.cfm?publication=1400>
- Dasgupta, Nilanjana and Asgari, Shaki (2004). Seeing is believing: Exposure to counterstereotypic women leaders and its effect on the malleability of automatic gender stereotyping. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40(5), pp.642-658. Available from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103104000253?via%3Dihub>
- Dobbin, Frank, and Kalev, Alexandra (2016). Why Diversity Programs Fail. *Harvard Business Review*, 94(7), 14. Available from: <https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-diversity-programs-fail>
- Equality and Human Rights Commission (2018). Unconscious bias training: Assessment of the evidence for effectiveness. Research report 113. Available from: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research-report-113-unconscious-bias-training-an-assessment-of-the-evidence-for-effectiveness-pdf.pdf>
- FitzGerald, Chloe; Martin, Angela; Berner, Delphine; Hurst, Samia (2019). Interventions designed to reduce implicit prejudices and implicit stereotypes in real world contexts: a systematic review. *BMC Psychol*, 2019, 7: 29.
- Forscher et al. (2018). "A Meta-Analysis of Procedures to Change Implicit Measures," PsyArXiv.
- Greenwald, A. G., McGhee, D. E., & Schwartz, J. L. K. (1998). Measuring individual differences in implicit cognition: The implicit association test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(6), 1464–1480. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.6.1464>
- Hewlett, Sylvia Ann (2019). *The Sponsor Effect*. *Harvard Business Review Press*.
- Hewlett, Sylvia Ann; Allwood, Noni; Sumberg, Karen; Scharf, Sandra and Fagnoli, Christina (2014). *Cracking the Code: Executive Presence and Multicultural Professionals*. Centre for Talent Innovation.
- Hosie, Rachel (2018). What Starbucks Employees Learnt on Their Racial Bias Training Day. *The Independent*. Available from: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/starbucks-diversity-training-racial-bias-us-store-closures-america-what-learned-a8376011.html>
- Kalev, Alexandra, Dobbin, Frank, Kelly, Eric (2006). Best Practices or Best Guesses? Assessing the Efficacy of Corporate Affirmative Action and Diversity Policies. *American Sociological Review*, 71(4), pp.589-617.
- Kulik, Carol; Perry, Elissa; Bourhis, Anne (2000). Ironic evaluation processes: effects of thought suppression on evaluations of older job applicants. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. Available from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3100397.pdf>
- Lykke, Maja; Helbech, Bodil and Glumer, Charlotte (2014). Temporal changes in the attitude towards smoking bans in public arenas among adults in the Capital Region of Denmark from 2007 to 2010. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*. Available from: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1403494814529034>
- McKinsey & Company and LeanIn (2019). *Women in the Workplace 2019*. McKinsey and LeanIn. Available from: https://www-report.s3.amazonaws.com/Women_in_the_Workplace_2019.pdf
- McKinsey (2017). Focusing on what works for workplace diversity. Available from: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/gender-equality/focusing-on-what-works-for-workplace-diversity>
- McKinsey (2016). *Women in the Workplace*. Available from: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/women-in-the-workplace-2016>
- National Centre for Social Research on behalf of Department for Work and Pensions. Wood, Martin; Hales, Jon; Purdon, Susan et al., (2009). A test for racial discrimination in recruitment practice in British cities. Research report no. 607. Available from: <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/20541/test-for-racial-discrimination.pdf#page=13>
- Noon, Mike (2018). Pointless Diversity Training: Unconscious Bias, New Racism and Agency. *Work, Employment and Society*, 32(1), 198-209
- ONS (2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by ethnic groups, England and Wales: 2 March 2020 and 10 April 2020. Available from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/coronavirusrelateddeathsbyethnicgroupenglandandwales/2march2020to10april2020>
- Paluck, Elizabeth and Donald P. Green (2009). "Prejudice Reduction: What Works? A Critical Look at Evidence from the Field and the Laboratory," *Annual Review of Psychology* 60.
- Poortinga, W., Sautkina, E, Thomas, G., Wolstenholmd, E. (2014). The English Plastic Bag Charge: Changes in Attitudes and Behaviour. Available from: [https://orca.cf.ac.uk/94652/1/Cardiff_University_Plastic_Bag_Report_A4%20\(final%20proof\).pdf](https://orca.cf.ac.uk/94652/1/Cardiff_University_Plastic_Bag_Report_A4%20(final%20proof).pdf)
- The Pipeline (2019). *Women Count*. Available from: <https://www.execpipeline.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Pipeline-Women-Count-2019.pdf>
- Siegel, Rachel (2018). Two black men arrested at Starbucks settle with Philadelphia for \$1 each. *The Washington Post*. Available from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/05/02/african-american-men-arrested-at-starbucks-reach-1-settlement-with-the-city-secure-promise-for-200000-grant-program-for-young-entrepreneurs/?noredirect=on>
- Thomas, G., Sautkina, E., Poortinga, W., Wolstenholme, E., Whitmarsh, L (2019). The English Plastic Bag Charge Changed Behavior and Increased Support for Other Charges to Reduce Plastic Waste. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10:266, Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6399129/>
- Virgin Money (2016). *Empowering Productivity: Harnessing the Talents of Women in Financial Services*.
- WEF (2018). Diversity training doesn't change people's behaviour. We need to find out what does. Available from: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/06/diversity-training-change-behaviour-gender-equality-work/>