

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS AGAINST DISABLED PEOPLE IN THE WORKPLACE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK has an estimated labour force shortage of 3 million. This shortage is expected to continue throughout the 2020s.¹ Currently the employment rate for disabled people is just 52.3%. So creating workplaces that are more inclusive to disabled people is crucial. There are just over 8 million people aged 16-64 with disabilities in the UK – approximately 20% of all 16-64 year olds – which further highlights the importance of creating more inclusive workplaces for disabled people.

Our research looks at implicit bias against disabled people in the business community. We find significant implicit bias against disabled people, in line with previous findings for the general public. We find no differences between people who work for large or small companies and we similarly find no difference between people who work in human resources (or make hiring decisions) and those who do not.

Our results suggest the significant efforts of large firms in tackling unconscious bias are currently ineffective. We recommend a more structured, evidence-based approach to unconscious bias training (UBT). It should include an evaluation framework to monitor the effectiveness of different types of training. This approach is in line with calls from the Equality and Human Rights Commission.²

CONTEXT

The employment rate for disabled people (52.3% employment rate, Q4 2020) compared to non-disabled people (81.1%) points to a large, persistent disability employment gap (28.8%, down from 33.7% in Q4 2013).³ One of the key barriers to employment for disabled people is the stereotypes, stigmas and taboos associated with disability that can lead to implicit biases.⁴

There have been consistent efforts over the last 30 years to address the persistent disability employment gap. These range from legislation (the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 later incorporated into the Equality Act 2010) and job/skills training (Pathways to Work) to financial assistance for employers (Access to Work) and models of best practice (Disability Confident).

There is also an emergent policy debate around the effectiveness of UBT and Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives more generally. Whilst there is widespread acknowledgement that UBT – in its current form – raises awareness of unconscious bias, the effect that UBT has on reducing bias and crucially in changing behaviour is more contentious. One factor that contributes to this is a lack of systematic evaluation of efficacy by employers.

KEY MESSAGES

- There remains significant and persistent unconscious bias against disabled people amongst the business community.
- Successfully addressing the issue of unconscious bias is key to creating more inclusive workplaces and addressing the UK labour force shortage.
- The significant efforts of large companies in the equality, diversity and inclusion space, especially relating to disability, are ineffective at reducing unconscious bias, so a new approach is needed.

RESEARCH AIMS

- To measure the level of unconscious bias among the business community towards disabled people.
- To examine the effect that working for a large compared to a small company has on unconscious bias towards disabled people.
- To examine the effect that working in human resources (or being involved in making hiring decisions) has on unconscious bias towards disabled people.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

- We find significant unconscious bias against disabled people among the business community.
- We find that there are no differences between those who work for large compared to small companies.
- Similarly, we find that there is no difference between people who work in human resources or make hiring decisions and those who don't.
- Being female, being a disabled person or having a worse overall health status are associated with lower unconscious bias against disabled people.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- New, more effective strategies for tackling unconscious bias are needed.
- Encourage routine inclusion of disability data in equality and diversity reporting (employee numbers and pay gaps) so that we can monitor progress properly.
- Implement a national evidence-based accreditation framework (including an evaluation framework) for unconscious bias training as recommended by the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

The team

University of Exeter: Dr Daniel Derbyshire – Research Fellow in Behavioural Economics; Professor Anne Spencer – Associate Professor in Health Economics; Professor Brit Grosskopf – Professor of Economics

The research was also co-designed in conjunction with our local third sector project partners; disAbility Cornwall, Age UK Cornwall and Isles of Scilly, and the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Local Enterprise Partnership. The Inclusivity Project is funded by the European Regional Development Fund.

Footnotes

1 Wilson, R., Barnes, S-A. (2020) Working futures 2017-2027: Long-run labour market and skills projections for the UK. Department for Education.
2 Acewologun, D., Cornish, T., Tresh, F (2018) Unconscious bias training: an assessment of the evidence for effectiveness. Equality and Human Rights Commission, Research Report 113.
3 Office for National Statistics (2021) Labour market status of disabled people. Labour Force Survey, Table A08.
4 Bonaccio, S., Connelly, C., Gellaly, I., Jetha, A., Martin Ginis, K. (2020) The participation of disabled people in the workplace and across the employment cycle: employer concerns and research evidence. Journal of Business and Psychology, Vol. 35, pp.135-158.
5 We use the Implicit Association Test (IAT), a widely used method for measuring implicit attitudes using reaction times. The use of IAT is consistently recommended by the Equality and Human Rights Commission report as being part of the best practice for conducting UBT.



European Union
European Regional
Development Fund