



# BIAS AND INCLUSIVE RECRUITMENT OUR FINDINGS

## UNCONSCIOUS BIAS AGAINST DISABLED AND OLDER PEOPLE IN THE WORKPLACE

### WHO IS THIS FOR?

**Primary audience:**  
SMEs, Voluntary sector

**Secondary audience:**  
Larger organisations, Public sector

### INTRODUCTION

It has been reported that many businesses across the United Kingdom are struggling to recruit the staff they need. At the same time older workers and those workers with disabilities or long-term conditions are underrepresented in the work force. By way of example, the employment rate for disabled people in the UK is 28% lower than for non-disabled people.

The recruitment and retention of employees involves many stages where a range of unconscious/implicit biases can enter decision making processes. There are many key decision points in the process that involve choosing among potential candidates, such as choosing who to interview, who to hire, who to promote, and, on occasion, who to fire. This is especially likely to be the case in small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) who don't have dedicated Human Resource departments or budgets for engaging in equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) activities. Unconscious bias can even be present in job descriptions and roles, influencing who applies in the first place.

While attitudes towards race and gender have both been studied in workplace and employment settings, the disability IAT (implicit association test) has not yet been examined specifically with a cohort from the business community. We also collected responses to an age IAT from the same community to explore the attitude towards recruitment of older people within SMEs; the first to look at a potential effect of firm size on implicit bias.

The purpose of our research has been to generate a better understanding of some of the challenges and opportunities facing employers in creating inclusive places to work, particularly for people who are over 50, disabled, or have a long-term health condition.

## BACKGROUND TO OUR RESEARCH

Our research was carried out in Cornwall, selected because it is similar to the national average and has a population shift that will be emulated across Britain's cities in the next decade.

Cornwall's levels of bias are consistent with elsewhere in the UK. Our work brought together research from the European Centre of Environment and Human Health at the University of Exeter in collaboration with partners disAbility Cornwall and Age UK Cornwall and Isles of Scilly.

In addition to surveying more than 100 businesses, we used the Implicit Association Test (IAT), a tool established in 1998 at Harvard University for measuring implicit attitudes and beliefs to reveal an individual's hidden or subconscious biases. The UK Equality and Human Rights Commission says the test is "effective at raising awareness of unconscious bias".

The IAT is the most popular method for measuring implicit attitudes, and gives a measure of (positive or negative) implicit associations towards a particular group of people based on reaction times in assigning various stimuli (e.g. pictures of disabled and non-disabled people) together with positive or negative stimuli (i.e. good and bad words).

## OUR FINDINGS

Our research found substantial levels of implicit bias against both disabled people and older people.

### 1. UNCONSCIOUS BIAS AGAINST DISABLED PEOPLE

There is significant unconscious bias against disabled people among the business community causing an instant barrier to recruitment, with persistent myths about lower productivity, high physical adaptation costs and high absenteeism.

The UK unemployment rate for disabled people, for example, is nearly twice the rate for non-disabled people (7.5% against 4%). Such inequalities place a substantial cost on the welfare system.

Our findings also suggest that:

- disabled people are underrepresented in the HR profession and in making hiring decisions.
- a person with a poor overall health status shows lower implicit bias towards disabled people.
- women have significantly lower biases towards disabled people than men.

### 2. UNCONSCIOUS BIAS AGAINST OLDER PEOPLE

We found substantial levels of implicit bias against older people, with no significant differences in the levels of implicit bias for either the disability or age IAT.

Unemployment of over-50s has also increased post-furlough. The Centre for Ageing Better cites latest labour market figures showing that 355,000 over-50s are currently unemployed, with 31,000 having been made redundant between May and July 2021 alone.

A recent report by the Organisation of Economic and Co-operation Development found that age-diverse workforces could raise GDP per capita by almost 19% in the next three decades, indicating the need to overcome this bias towards older people.



### 3. IS UNCONSCIOUS BIAS TRAINING WORKING?

We found that both large firms and SMEs are failing at inclusivity.

Our findings show that there are no differences between those who work for large compared to small companies. This is despite the amount of money large organisations spend on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and unconscious bias training (UBT) – up to \$8 billion each year in the USA.

Similarly, there has been a substantial increase in the number of diversity and inclusion-based job roles over recent years, with LinkedIn suggesting a global rise of 71% from 2015 to 2020. People involved in recruitment and retention decisions – especially HR professionals – are also often specifically trained in EDI issues given their remit of ensuring compliance with relevant legislation – such as the Equality Act 2010.

However we found that the significant efforts of large companies in the EDI space, especially relating to disability, are ineffective at reducing unconscious bias. Indeed, neither working for a large company nor being involved in HR have a significant effect on implicit attitudes towards disabled people or older people.

#### CONCLUSION

Whilst both the UK workforce shortage and the disability employment gap persist, creating workplaces that are more inclusive for disabled and older people should continue to be seen as a key policy priority.

Our results show significant negative implicit attitudes towards disabled and older people, and suggest unconscious bias may still be a significant barrier to employment. Addressing this gap will create more inclusive workplaces and in turn may help to address the employment gap.

The government published a review of bias training in 2021 that reconfirmed previous findings by the Equalities Commission. There is limited evidence that bias training is effective, because bias training is varied, unregulated, and people often do it to ‘tick a box’ without measuring outcomes.

This suggests that new, more effective strategies for tackling unconscious bias are needed, including regulation; develop standards of bias training and measurements rather than a tick box approach and not abandon it.

Lobby bodies must develop accreditation and encourage routine inclusion of disability and age data in equality and diversity reporting so that we can monitor progress properly.

We encourage people and businesses to take the first step and do the IAT test for themselves.  
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

