

What Bias?

BY ALEX MOORE

Society has strived to eliminate explicit discrimination from organizations for decades, and that has translated to a lot of work for talent development professionals. From regulation-driven compliance training to internally planned diversity workshops, learning-driven efforts to reduce racism, sexism, and other undisguised forms of discrimination have contributed to what is now a more inclusive professional world than ever before.

However, unconscious biases—the prejudices people don't realize that they have—still cloud companies' internal decisions, influence their

interactions with customers, and shade how the world perceives them. They're also hard to pinpoint. In recent years, organizations have begun using training to help employees filter out these biases.

Google and Microsoft, for example, began offering unconscious bias training (UBT) to their employees five and three years ago, respectively. This year, Starbucks, American Airlines, and New York City Public Schools all launched widespread training initiatives around the topic after incidents highlighted employees' bias in interactions with customers (or in the case of the school system, students).

Organizations are implementing unconscious bias training to reduce prejudices that employees aren't aware they have.



What does UBT look like?

To better understand how organizations design UBT, I examined offerings from three large companies. Two, those of Microsoft and Google, are available through the firms' websites. I gathered information about the third, Starbucks, through a preview video and article shared on the company's website.

Each of these UBT offerings reflects a unique approach. The training programs differ in delivery method, participation requirements, structure, and content.

Google's UBT, delivered as a 60- to 90-minute in-person workshop with voluntary participation, is organized as an extended business case. It uses data from both outside sources and internal studies to support its every detail, building a narrative of how acknowledging and accounting for unconscious biases can help the company make better people decisions—hiring, evaluating, and promoting employees.

The training program begins by presenting the biological reasons humans develop biases, explains how those biases can be helpful in certain situations even today, and then moves to how they can lead to systemic flaws in talent decisions. Next, it offers participants four ways to mitigate unconscious bias: build a structure for success, collect data, evaluate subtle messages, and hold everyone accountable. The program closes with a question-and-answer session between participants and its facilitator.

Microsoft's training, on the other hand, is delivered as a 48-page e-learning module. According to one of the company's press releases, the program was mandatory and all employees had to complete it by the end of the year it was released (2015). Like Google's offering, Microsoft's UBT focuses on helping employees communicate more inclusively and make better people decisions. However, it differs in how it conveys this message.

The program starts with a business case built around data showing how unconscious bias could affect Microsoft, but its key learning moments rely on analyzing case studies. The course

presents users with several short videos, showing different scenes of a project team struggling with poor, noninclusive communication. After each video, the course highlights characters' "micro behaviors" (subtle, bias-driven actions) and how these contribute to the team's dysfunction. The training program treats each example as a teaching moment, explaining how employees could have acted in a more inclusive manner.

The Starbucks UBT was a half-day workshop provided to more than 175,000 employees, for which the company closed more than 8,000 of its U.S. stores and offices on the afternoon of May 29. The company framed the course as a recommitment to one of Starbucks's founding principles: creating public spaces where everyone feels like they belong. The curriculum featured a mix of videos with messages and discussions from company leaders and outside experts about bias; in-person exercises and activities for both groups and individuals; a thought-provoking documentary; and a review of company policies and guidelines.

Why provide UBT?

According to Stacey Engle, executive vice president at Fierce, a leadership development training company, awareness is what motivates organizations to offer UBT. "They realize that the more people know about how our brains work, the more effective we can be," she explains. "It's recognizing that we filter the world through our own context, and that we must acknowledge that context in all our conversations."

However, this awareness usually doesn't emerge until after organizations experience a rude awakening. "We see a lot of demand in the market around reactions to incidents—a mistake a leader made or the realization that subtle prejudice has influenced decision making," Engle says. And although she admits that some organizations develop diversity and inclusion training on a proactive basis, she notes that implementing something in response to a complaint or news report is much more common.

At least two of the training programs profiled here were developed as reactions to events or public reports, which reinforces Engle's point. Starbucks's example was a response to a highly publicized incident of an employee's racial bias toward two customers. And Google developed its UBT after media representations of tech industry workers and studies about subtle prejudice shed light on the fact that unconscious bias was probably affecting the company's people decisions. (Information about the origin of Microsoft's UBT offering is not publicly available.)

Engle believes more organizations may take proactive approaches to UBT in the future. She points to how a wider awareness of unconscious bias in society is "creating conversations among leaders and HR professionals" that may not have occurred only a few years ago.

What obstacles do organizations face with UBT?

According to Engle, talent development professionals developing and implementing UBT will face the difficulties associated with all training. "Whether it's resource allocation, creating buy-in, sustainability efforts, or driving behavior change, those challenges will always be around," she explains.

The biggest issue is figuring out what UBT should prioritize. "What type of training are you providing to which audiences in your organization?" Engle asks. "What are the two or three core competencies and skills that need to be invested in this fiscal year and next fiscal year?" In her experience, leaders tend to stall on answering those questions until an incident occurs, which feeds into the reactive nature of UBT.

Another challenge Engle identifies is the tendency of organizations to lump UBT in with larger diversity and inclusion initiatives under human resources. "We have a call to action today where social media and the immediacy of communication require our leaders to become better equipped to handle issues that two decades ago just went to HR," she says. To her, inclusiveness has become an important communication skill, which means

the best UBT programs “give all leaders the skill and confidence to step into situations where unconscious bias may be an issue.”

How do organizations ensure UBT translates to behavior change?

Once employees become aware of unconscious bias—and all three training programs highlighted in this article emphasize that all people are subject to it—the next step for talent development is turning knowledge into action. Google accomplishes this by requesting that learners choose one of the four practices presented in its course and implement it when they return to work. Microsoft provides a workbook with instructions to help employees reflect over a period of weeks on what they’ve learned from the training program. It also directs them to free online tests they can take to continue sharpening awareness of their biases. Starbucks announced that it will support its UBT by updating company policies and procedures in ways that make it easier for employees to act without bias.

Engle believes that providing opportunities to reinforce knowledge and behavior after an initial learning event is essential for effective UBT. “You don’t only need the knowledge, you also need the tools,” she says. In other words, after making employees aware of unconscious bias, the best UBT initiatives follow up with updated policies and performance support tools.

How can organizations tell if UBT works?

Considering that UBT often comes about as a reaction to specific incidents or revelations around how bias affects an organization, many questions swirl around how to evaluate it. Does an absence of evidence—the fact that no more incidents or revelations occur—indicate the success of UBT? Or can companies find other ways to measure it?

Talent development has several options.

According to Google’s HR website Re:Work, that company uses data-driven

evaluations to ensure that its UBT efforts yield their intended results. The firm says it gathers data through experiments, using test groups and control groups. In one experiment, for example, it compared surveys of employees who participated in face-to-face UBT workshops, ones who watched self-study videos of the same workshop, and ones who received no training at all. These surveys focused on employees’ awareness of their biases and motivation to overcome them.

According to Engle, tying the results of UBT to metrics that companies already track is another way to measure program effectiveness. “Some companies look at decreases in HR complaints or the number of lawsuits they receive,” she comments. However, she has seen other companies measure success against employee engagement or metrics used to gauge leadership competency. “Not making assumptions around others is a required skill in leadership today, and when we can change how we show up to conversations, we’ll see relationships between employees and managers improve,” she says.

Alex Moore is a former writer/editor for ATD.

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