

## 1.6.18: Challenges of Employee Diversity

### Learning Objectives

- Explain the challenges of employee diversity within organizations



Figure 1. The Walls that Separate Us. The time, place, and way we grow up shape how we view people. It's common to develop biases and avoid people who you view as very different from you. This can cause tension in the workplace.

The things that make us different can also make it challenging for us to work well together. These challenges are not only based on actual or perceived differences embedded in our culture or psyche but also on perceived threats to the established order. Society is (at least nominally) striving to move away from these challenges and become a more equitable place.

The issue that is less obvious and, perhaps for that reason, more pervasive, is unconscious bias. We know perception is personal and subjective; however, what we are largely unaware of is that there can be a disconnect between our conscious thoughts and our unconscious beliefs or biases, primarily a product of sociocultural conditioning. And unless we circumvent the automatic responses, the unconscious rules.

In 1998, scientists from Harvard, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington launched “Project Implicit,” a series of implicit association or social cognition tests (IAT) designed to reveal participants’ unconscious (attitude and belief) biases based on demographic factors such as color, race, and sex. Briefly, an IAT measures the strength of associations between concepts (for example, gay or straight people) and judgments (good or bad) or associations (for example, joyous or tragic).

The idea behind the Implicit Association Test is that we don’t always know our minds; that is, we are unaware of the divergence between our conscious attitudes and our unconscious beliefs. The divergence between the two is a blind spot and is as potentially dangerous as a blind spot when driving—on both individual and organizational levels. Thus, the goal is to raise awareness of hidden biases or blind spots so we can take action to counter our own biases.

For example, you may consciously believe that black and white individuals should be treated equally; however, your responses (and those of many others) may show that you associate black individuals with negative actions (e.g., violence and crime) more than you associated white individuals with the same actions. This association may contribute to individual decisions, a pattern of behavior, and a culture that reinforces these associations and significantly decreases the opportunities for black individuals to participate in society from a starting place equal to that of white individuals.

The Social Attitudes category of the Implicit Association Test includes a number of tests such as the things you associate with a Man-Woman pairing, an Arab Muslim-Other People pairing, and a Disabled-Abled pairing.

To take the test, [visit the Project Implicit site](#).

If not recognized and challenged, these unconscious—and conscious—biases can become codified in the culture or a sub-culture and become a cultural norm, effectively nullifying the benefits of a group’s diversity by marginalizing minority individuals or prompting industry avoidance or an exodus of certain groups away from a field, as is being seen with women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) occupations.

The critical problem with biases is that they undermine both an organization’s brand and its strategic intent. Whether actions are conscious or not, the gap between stated attitudes and operational realities undermines market credibility and effectiveness along a continuum from recruiting to new product development. Without awareness and appropriate intervention, bias can lead to dominant group (“person like me”) favoritism in selection, evaluation, project assignment, and promotion and preclude or silence the differences of opinion critical to innovation.

For additional perspective on the challenges of achieving employee diversity, watch Helen Turnbull’s TED Talk titled “[Inclusion, Exclusion, Illusion and Collusion](#).” Key takeaway: “The unchallenged brain is not worth trusting.”

### ? Key Takeaways

For additional perspective on the benefits and challenges of diversity in the workplace, explore Hult Business School's summary of diversity [benefits and challenges](#).

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