WHY ATTRACTIVE PEOPLE GET PAID MORE AND **OTHER INTERESTING FACTS**

Changing hats
by Stephanie Caunter

D id you know that attractive people get paid 12% more than the average person?

Researchers say this is part of what's called the "halo effect". It's when we notice one great thing about a person and the glow (or halo) of that great characteristic defines everything else we think about the person.

The opposite of that is the "horns effect". For instance, 51% of human resources professionals are biased against overweight women (without being aware of it).

These are some examples of unconscious bias in action. It is a bias or skewed form of thinking that is very real and pervasive. All of us do it but most of us aren't aware of it.

Let me share a personal story of unconscious bias.

Sheila (not her real name) works on my team at PwC in Kuala Lumpur. She is a dedicated, persevering and mature person. She can dance up a storm. She's got a penchant for spicy food.

When discussing her career with her in the early days of her tenure, I had alluded to the fact that I didn't expect as much of her as I might of my other team members.

Oh, did I forget to add that she's got a young child?

See, in my effort to be a caring and understanding boss, I had made a decision on Sheila's behalf.

Amid her many interesting characteristics, I had zoomed in on just one: the fact that she had a young child.

And I had assumed that it meant she needed special consideration; that she shouldn't be expected to work as hard or deliver as much as some of my single team members could.

Bear in mind that at the time of our conversation, I had my own young child. How much of that coloured my assumptions of Sheila? A fair bit, probably.

You might wonder how she reacted. Suffice to say that she put me in my place. She reminded me that I had no right making that assumption and decision for her.

I've always thought of myself as being open-minded and I certainly don't aim to discriminate (I'm sure most of you don't aim to either). But here was an instance where I had been doing exactly that.

The thing is, unconscious bias is very real. It's grounded in a lot of science.

Studies dating back to the Eighties show that people can exhibit unconscious bias even if they're explicitly against prejudice and discrimination.

We develop these biases because of the friends we have, the way we were brought up or because of our environment.

At our recent Global Diversity Week, we had some really interesting conversations about the topic.

I learnt a lot, such as unconscious bias can be rather sneaky and, because it's hard to identify, can be rather dangerous.

You may have seen it happen at your workplace. Perhaps certain teams seem to look and act in a similar way. That's because it's only human to gravitate towards those who are similar to you.

In recruitment, that manifests itself in the hiring managers bringing in people just like them.

The danger? Groupthink. It's when groups of people strive for consensus and harmony without actually thinking about whether they are considering the best outcome.

Or have you sat in meetings and wondered why it's always the same few, loud voices talking while others remain silent? Perhaps that's because you haven't actually asked the quiet ones for their views.

The risk? Losing out on what could be some innovative ideas.

Left unchecked, we may isolate certain colleagues. Or perhaps lose out on potential talent because they don't fit our predetermined mould of what a successful hire should look like.

I left our Global Diversity Week with two takeaways.

Firstly, we all have a personal responsibility to be aware of our biases and to try to minimise them in our interactions.

Equally, we have a personal responsibility to object to biases.

This is easier said than done, but as long as we don't call them out (or choose to keep the status quo because that's just easier) then biases will perpetuate. And that doesn't lead to any good for anyone.

So, I was wondering if there were some simple steps to help overcome my own unconscious biases.

The PwC playbook does have a few suggestions, which seem so obvious. (I wonder why I'm not already doing them!)

Here are some of them:

- Find opportunities to work with someone you normally wouldn't work with.
- If you're organising a team event, stop and consciously think about how inclusive that event is. For example, do you always organise after-hours get-togethers or meals at specific eateries and is this inclusive of everyone that is being invited?
- Consider if you are holding back. Have the courage to express your views, even if it is an opposing point of view.
- Stop and reflect on who you are providing opportunities to (such as networking events, client introductions or training).

Are you frequently selecting the same people or people who are most like you? Try to actively rotate the opportunities among your team.

Meanwhile, another colleague of mine has started a little experiment she calls #lunchwithastranger.

Once a week, she heads out alone and attempts to strike up a conversation over lunch with a stranger. So far, she hasn't received any weird looks!

What will you do to tackle your unconscious bias? E

Stephanie Caunter studied engineering but soon realised it wasn't meant for her. Today, she heads PwC Malaysia's marketing and communications team. She counts herself lucky to be able to learn a bit more every day about being a better wife, daughter, sister, friend, mother and teammate.