

VIEWPOINT

The Business Journal welcomes letters to the editor and guest columns

Send letters and guest columns to Douglas Fruehling at dfruehling@bizjournals.com

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GUEST COMMENT

The peril of cultural, unconscious bias

Being selected by the Washington Business Journal as a 40 Under 40 honoree for 2018 was a tremendous honor, so imagine my shock when I discovered that another Asian-American woman's picture was used in the article instead of my own.

When I opened Bridge Partners' D.C. office last year, I was excited to join an organization focused on recruiting diverse executives. Our placements at the executive level are over 75 percent people of color. To be recognized by the WBJ for the impact we were making on diversity and inclusion at the highest leadership levels was extremely gratifying.

When I clicked on the published article and found the picture of another Asian-American female staring back at me, my first reaction was naturally disappointment. I was quick to dismiss it as "mistakes happen." But as it began to sink in, I started to consider the experience as a diversity and inclusion professional.

The editors explained they had two photos in the system labeled with the same last name and the wrong photo was used in the article. They shared that the mistake should have been caught.

The mistake was undoubtedly unintentional, but unconscious



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bias is exactly that. Unconscious biases, also known as implicit biases, are the stereotypes of groups of people that individuals form outside of their own conscious awareness. Unfortunately, everyone holds unconscious beliefs about different groups, and these biases often stem from our tendency to categorize people.

Biases are often more prevalent when multitasking or working under time pressure, which I believe was the case with the swapped photo. If my last name was Smith or Jones this mistake may not have occurred. This is why diversity is important in every organization.

In the D.C. area we are fortunate to live and work in diverse communities. Letting unconscious bias influence decision-making has consequences that go beyond hurt feelings. A build-up of seemingly

small issues/errors during the hiring process, or over a long-term talent development strategy, can lead to poor decisions and a toxic culture. This harms the organization's reputation, retention, employee relations and recruitment.

Overcoming bias involves self-reflection and candid discussion – none of which are easy. If we treat unconscious bias as a blind spot that needs to be addressed there is a chance to create positive change.

Tackling unconscious bias head-on, as the Washington Business Journal chose to do in allowing me to tell my story, is a shining example of how organizations can recognize their biases and explore ways to improve, innovate and incorporate diversity in all aspects of its business.

Here are a few more ways to start that change.

► **Be aware of your own biases:** People are often unaware of their own prejudices and prefer not to admit them, even if they are. By realizing and accepting that we all have bias, we can learn to watch for it in ourselves and help others who work with us to do the same.

► **Embrace a diverse workforce:** Cultivate systems and a culture that supports diversity, inclusion and equity as beneficial to all

organizations.

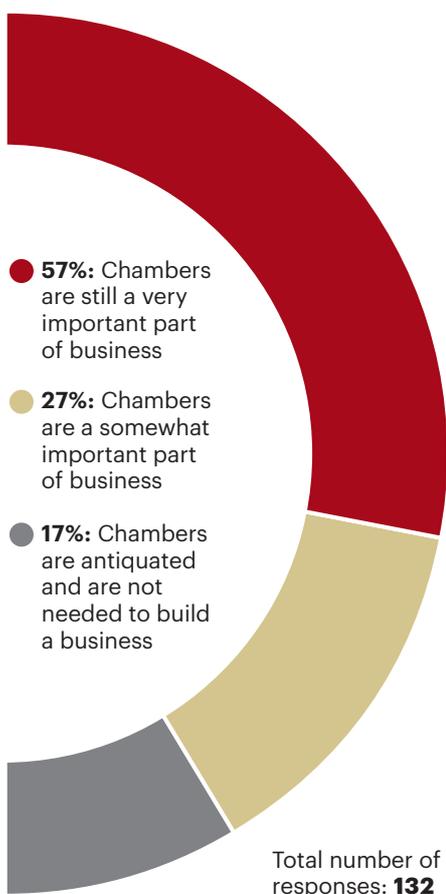
Recruitment is an area where unconscious bias affects decision-making. People may subconsciously favor applicants from backgrounds similar to their own. Conscious efforts must be made to reduce this bias. For example, when reviewing resumes, read several side-by-side rather than just one a time to focus more on the performance and skills mentioned rather than gender or race.

► **Metrics and accountability:** Goals are more easily met when there are metrics and accountability attached. Diversity is no different. It's not as simple as recruitment and increasing the number of diverse executives and employees in your organization. Think about who is applying for jobs, who is offered jobs, who accepts these jobs and who is successful in their jobs after six months – understanding the reasons behind the numbers and percentages allows for exploration of why certain metrics are not being met.

Structured interview processes, where questions are consistent across candidates, have been found to reduce bias relative to conversational interviews where people often talk about what they have in common, including schools.

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