

Inspiring others



# **Disability: A Research Study on Unconscious Bias**

**July 2014**

## **Executive Summary**

It is now nearly 20 years since the passing of the first Disability Discrimination Act outlawed discrimination against those with a disability. However, despite substantial progress, disabled people remain significantly less likely to be in employment than non-disabled people<sup>12</sup> and recent research from Scope<sup>3</sup> highlights that negative public attitudes towards disability prevail. Scope reports that:

- Two thirds (67%) of the British public feels uncomfortable talking to disabled people.
- Over a third (36%) of people tend to think of disabled people as not as productive as everyone else.

The Government and employers have worked to address inequalities at work for people with disabilities and progress has been made, but clearly there is still some way to go.

Over the last few decades' new research from the fields of neuroscience and social psychology has shed light onto the working of the human brain and the concept of unconscious bias. Unconscious biases are simply our unintentional people preferences, which are created and maintained by the way our brains work, to sort data quickly and are influenced by our upbringing, the media and our life experiences.

The Employers Network for Equality and Inclusion (enei) have worked with employers for some time to understand and mitigate against the impact of unconscious bias in the workplace and in doing so spotted a worrying trend: Unconscious bias against disabled people appeared to be higher than any other social group.

As a result of this observation, enei conducted research to explore:

- If the strength of bias against disabled people is stronger than for the characteristics of gender and race.
- If unconscious attitudes towards people with disabilities has changed since the London 2012 Paralympic Games.

Unconscious bias was measured using a computer-based test called Implicitly®, which measures the speed and response patterns in the way people carry out simple sorting tasks.

The findings are remarkable.

### ***enei results show that:***

- ***Over one in three people show an unconscious bias against those with a disability, higher than levels of bias on the basis of gender or race.***
- ***Despite claims that the London 2012 Paralympic Games signalled a change in attitudes towards disability, levels of unconscious bias are higher now than they were in 2010/2011 before the Games.***

N.B. Implicitly uses images of people with visible disabilities to measure associations and therefore the results may not reflect bias towards people with other types of disabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> ONS Labour Force Survey Quarter 2 2012

<sup>2</sup> Office for Disability Issues Facts and Figures

<sup>3</sup> Scope ["Current Attitudes towards disabled people"](#) May 2014

The results demonstrate an alarming level of bias against disabled people and that despite the apparently positive impact the Paralympic Games has had on public attitudes towards disabled people, this may not translate into the unconscious perceptions and biases that influence decisions.

Whilst unconscious bias is developed and maintained by the brain's automatic sorting process, there are ways to mitigate against the effects and action must be taken now to change public attitudes and reduce inequalities for people with disabilities, both within society and the workplace.

enei recommend that employers take the following actions to reduce the impact of unconscious bias against disabled people in the workplace:

- Measure the unconscious bias of recruiters and key decision makers to raise awareness of bias, as understanding your own biases, learning how to overcome them whilst having the right tools and support in place, is key to removing barriers for disabled people.
- Encourage recruiters to put forward more candidates with disabilities to break down stereotypes and build more role models.
- Review positive action programmes and the process for agreeing reasonable adjustments for the risks of triggering stereotypes amongst decision makers, the staff (including staff with disabilities) and the public.
- Consider confining work on reasonable adjustments to a small group of staff to minimise the exposure to staff that don't understand the process and could make negative assumptions about the cost and impact.
- Avoid 'talking up' the impact of interventions which were thought to make disability bias less likely until the hard evidence is to hand as there is a risk of 'back-lash' effects.
- Review the impact of disability initiatives such as 'two ticks' and the 'Disability Confident Campaign' to ensure they are producing long term and lasting effects on the experiences of disabled people.
- Use positive disabled role models to show the positive effect disabled people can have at work. Focus on their achievements at work and not on their disability.
- Encourage honest discussions about disability in the workplace. Train line managers about different types of disabilities and how to talk to someone about their disability, giving them the confidence to have effective communication with different types of people.
- Review approach to reasonable adjustments to allow provision for extra help, reduced or different hours, reduced workload or different duties.
- Make sure key people in the organisation are aware of Access to Work, the support offered and the funding that may be available.
- Monitor disability within the workforce to gain management information to help inform future decision-making. At a minimum monitor disability:
  - At recruitment stage
  - Of staff with different performance ratings
  - Of Leavers

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The Project

The Employers Network for Equality and Inclusion (enei) work with many of the UK's best employers, in the private, public and charity sectors, to eradicate discrimination and promote inclusive practices in the workplace.

In the last few years, many enei Members have embarked on work to raise awareness of unconscious bias and the implications at work. When doing so, it has become clear that there are often stronger biases against disabled people than other minority groups. This is something that enei and its Members felt should be explored further on a larger scale.

As a result, enei developed a research proposal to investigate:

- If the strength of bias against disabled people is stronger than for the characteristics of gender and race.
- If unconscious attitudes towards people with disabilities has changed since the London 2012 Paralympic Games.

The project was supported by the enei Membership and sponsored by the following enei Members:

- Centrica
- Citizens Advice
- Financial Ombudsman Service
- Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue
- Kent County Council
- Nationwide Building Society
- Santander

### 1.2 Facts and Figures

#### Demographics

- Nearly one in five (18%, 11.4 million) of the UK population reported having a limiting long-term health problem or disability in 2011. This proportion has remained unchanged since 2001<sup>4</sup>.
- Wales reported the highest proportion of the population with a limiting long-term health problem or disability at 23% (696,000)<sup>5</sup>.
- 46% of disabled people are male and 54% are female<sup>6</sup>.
- The prevalence of disability rises with age: 6% for children, 16% for working age adults and 45% for adults over State Pension Age<sup>7</sup>.
- Predictions suggest that 58% of people over 50 will have a long-term health condition by 2020<sup>8</sup>.

#### Source of Disability

- Only 17% of disabled people are born with their disability. Most disabled people have had to adjust to their impairment as an adult, as they fall ill, have an accident or find it harder to get around as they grow older.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ONS Census 2011

<sup>5</sup> ONS Census 2011

<sup>6</sup> ONS Family Resources Survey 2011/12

<sup>7</sup> ONS Family Resources Survey 2011/12

<sup>8</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission

<sup>9</sup> NHS <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Disability/Pages/Lifewithdisability.aspx>

- Less than 8% of disabled people use wheelchairs. The majority of impairments are not visible<sup>10</sup>.

#### Disability and Work

- There are over 6.9 million disabled people of working age, which represents 19% of the working population<sup>11</sup>.
- For the working-age population, there is a 30% gap in employment between disabled people (46% employed) and non-disabled people (76% employed), although the gap is reducing<sup>12</sup>.
- 80% of all those who become disabled are in employment at the time they acquire a disability, only 60% are employed the following year, and 36% the year after that<sup>13</sup>.
- Disabled people are more likely to experience unfair treatment at work (19%) than non-disabled people (13%)<sup>14</sup>.
- Every year 300,000 people leave work, of whom nearly half do so without having a period of sick leave first, meaning they have no support to get back into work and no attachment to an employer<sup>15</sup>.

#### The Paralympic Effect

- Immediately after the Games 81% of British adults said that the Paralympic Games 2012 had a positive impact on the way disabled people are viewed by the public<sup>16</sup>.
- In March 2013, 53% of people said that the Paralympics had a positive impact on the way they themselves viewed disabled people<sup>17</sup>. Nearly 50% of people interviewed said that they found the Paralympic athletes more inspirational than their Olympic counterparts<sup>18</sup>.
- In the first quarter of 2014, 68% of people felt the general public's attitude towards disabled people had improved since the Paralympic Games in 2012. However, 70.7% of non-disabled people felt the public opinion had improved compared to only 56.1% of disabled people<sup>19</sup>.

### 1.3 The Political Context

It is nearly 20 years since the introduction of legislation in the UK with the potential to improve the position of disabled people. The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 sought to eliminate discrimination, and most recently, the Equality Act 2010 sought to streamline UK anti-discrimination legislation. For Great Britain (but not Northern Ireland) it repealed and replaced the DDA (as amended).

Over this time, there have been a number of additional Government initiatives to improve the position of disabled people in the UK. Most recently:

- The creation of an Interdepartmental Group On Disability in 2014
- The DWP's Disability Confident Campaign<sup>20</sup> in 2013: and
- In July 2013, the Government published Fulfilling Potential – Making it Happen, alongside the Fulfilling Potential: Making it Happen Action Plan<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> English Federation of Disability Sport, Papworth Trust – Disability in the UK fact and figures September 2012

<sup>11</sup> Disability Rights Commission 2008

<sup>12</sup> The Labour Force Survey in Quarter 2 2012

<sup>13</sup> Disability in the United Kingdom 2012 DWP in-house Report No.109

<sup>14</sup> Fair Treatment at Work Survey 2008

<sup>15</sup> Black and Frost 2011 [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/181060/health-at-work.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/181060/health-at-work.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3038/Superhuman-Paralympians-change-view-of-disabled-people.aspx>

<sup>17</sup> The ONS Opinion Survey (March 2013)

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.unitedresponse.org.uk/resources/our-infographics/did-the-paralympics-affect-public-perceptions-of-disability/>

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/326220/opinions-survey-ad-hoc-paralympic-statistics-release-july-2014.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/326220/opinions-survey-ad-hoc-paralympic-statistics-release-july-2014.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-disability-confident-campaign>

<sup>21</sup> <http://odi.dwp.gov.uk/fulfilling-potential/index.php>

'Fulfilling Potential-Making it Happen', emphasises the need for innovative cross sector partnerships with disabled people and their organisations and promoting new ways of working to deliver meaningful outcomes. It underscores the Government's commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People, to bring about the changes needed in communities that have a real and lasting effect on the day-to-day lives of disabled people.

The action plan includes current disability strategy activity and plans across the whole of Government and beyond. It sets out clearly in one place where progress has been made and includes a commitment to publish an annual report on the outcomes and indicators set out in the document.

The Framework provides a basis for how Government can measure progress towards their vision and includes a number of indicators, which will show where progress is being made and where work needs to be done. These indicators cover six different themes;

1. Education
2. Employment
3. Income
4. Health and wellbeing
5. Choice and control
6. Inclusive communities

'Fulfilling Potential-Making it Happen' was also designed to harness the power of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games to deliver further lasting change to attitudes and aspirations and ensure that there is a tangible legacy for disabled people: the Paralympic Legacy. The London 2012 Games were conceived and delivered as the first 'Legacy Games'. Government has committed to using the inspirational power of the Games to deliver further, lasting change.

In 2013 the Government also launched the Disability Confident Campaign targeting employers and workforce attitudes to hiring disabled people. The aim is to work with employers to remove barriers, increase understanding and ensure that disabled people have the opportunities to fulfil their potential and realise their aspirations. To help to identify and share best practice, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has produced various campaign materials and a range of support and advice for employers who want to become even more disability confident.

#### 1.4 Employers Approach and Attitudes to People with Disabilities

Employers in the UK have responded to the legislation and increase in awareness about the issues disabled people face with a wide range of practical solutions.

In 2011 Young and Bhaumik reported that a third of employers had taken at least one action in the last 12 months to keep employees with health problems in work or facilitate their return to work and employers who were most likely to take action to retain employees included large organisations, public sector and trade unionised employers. The most commonly cited measures used by employers included reduced or different hours (29%), meetings to discuss extra help (28%), reducing employee workload (25%), different duties (25%)<sup>22</sup>.

These approaches may help to provide equal opportunities for disabled people but the best employers also have innovative and inclusive policies and practices to support disabled people at work. These provide a framework to help staff make the right decisions to support disabled people to succeed at work, but this may be hampered if the people in decision-making roles have deeply held views about the limitations of disabled people.

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<sup>22</sup> Young and Bhaumik 2011

There are numerous surveys of the public's attitudes towards disabled people and the results are worrying. The latest research from Scope<sup>23</sup> reveals that:

- Two Thirds (67%) of the British public feels uncomfortable talking to disabled people.
- Over a third (36%) of people tend to think of disabled people as not as productive as everyone else.
- Over four fifths (85%) of the British public believe that disabled people face prejudice.
- A quarter (24%) of disabled people has experienced attitudes or behaviours where other people have expected less of them because of their disability.
- One fifth (21%) of 18-34 year olds admit they have actually avoided talking to a disabled person because they weren't sure how to communicate with them.
- Well over half (58%) of disabled people said that they had not noticed any change in people's attitudes towards them as a disabled person following the 2012 Paralympic Games.
- One in 5 (22%) were of the opinion that people's attitudes have worsened, while less than one in ten (9%) believed people's attitudes towards disabled people have improved.

Research tells us that there is a stigma against disabled people in society, which has to be mirrored, to a certain extent, in the workforce. This poses a challenge for employers who will not achieve the inclusion they desire by simply instructing employees to behave in a certain way, as there may be deep-rooted attitudes and biases that must be understood and broken down.

### 1.5 Unconscious Bias

Unconscious biases are simply our unintentional people preferences. They develop along the neural pathways of our brain as a result of our upbringing, the media we watch or read and our life experiences. They are underpinned and maintained by the way our brains are wired to rapidly sort other people for quick and efficient decision-making. Our brains have learned to connect (to associate) particular positive or negative categories to particular groups of people through this process of being socialised and our experiences. The categories we use to sort people are like a simple filing system or set of pigeonholes. We have to be able to rapidly and unconsciously sort people into categories in this way because unless we did this the complexity of making new decisions about every new person we meet would be overwhelming for our conscious brains. It is both normal and necessary but because unconscious bias evades our conscious attention and control, we are often unaware we have these biases.

We activate this sorting process, which links a group of people to specific categories without thinking, in around a tenth of a second. This is three times faster than our eyes can even recognise we are looking at a human face. The problems arise because being linked to these categories can have positive or negative implications and we are inclined to create more positive categories for people who look and sound like us or who share our values or backgrounds, and less positive categories for those who do not. This can mean that when we meet someone from a particular group we automatically activate these negative and positive links too, and these affect our behaviour.

Research shows that they affect the decisions we make, how we perceive information about people and how we attribute the causes of behaviour. We normally have a positive bias in favour of people who are like us which leads us to favour them over people who are not like us.

Increasingly there is evidence that these unconscious biases affect our decision making at work. They may impact decisions in recruitment, team formation, work allocation, promotion, development, discipline etc.

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<sup>23</sup> Scope May 2014 Current Attitudes Towards Disabled People

Unconscious bias could be one of the reasons that the diversity and inclusion initiatives of the last 20 years have failed to realise their full potential, because if people don't know they have a bias, how can they be expected to ignore it and make the right decisions.

## 1.6 Methodology

enei measured the strength of associations (the connections between the groups of people and the positive or negative categories) through a computer-based test called Implicitly®.

Implicitly® uses the speed and response patterns in the way people carry out simple sorting tasks with rules which change during the test. Implicitly® has benchmarked changes in these times and patterns when the sorting rules change into the likelihood of unintentional preferences affecting our behaviour. These effects are often quite subtle; feeling more/less comfortable around people from a particular group, having higher/lower levels of trust and information sharing. Psychologists have referred to these subtle behaviours as 'micro-inequities' because they can produce inequalities in the way people are treated without people realising. Implicitly® is produced in a number of versions to explore unconscious biases around: Age, Bodyweight, Disability, Ethnic Origin, Gender, Nationality and Sexual Orientation.

Most of the tests attempt to tap into how strongly the test taker sees a group as more valuable or competent although some tests (e.g. Ethnicity tests) tend to tap wider stereotypes at work around intelligence, honesty and trustworthiness too.

Implicitly® tests produce a score label which indicates the strength of a particular unconscious bias.

- LOW - Most tests scores are attributed a LOW test label which means that although someone may have a bias, it is not thought to be strong enough to affect behaviour.
- MID RANGE – A moderate bias is thought to be present which affects behaviour, but particularly when under emotional or cognitive load.
- ELEVATED and HIGH - Biases are thought to be stronger and more likely to be affecting behaviour irrespective of emotional or cognitive load.

Implicitly® is able to measure bias against more than one group in the test. For example the Ethnicity tests often measure bias against both Black and Minority Ethnic groups and White groups simply on the way the response times and patterns change as the sorting rules change.

In this study, Implicitly® was used to look at the levels of unconscious bias against people with a visible disability and compared these bias levels to those on the basis of gender and ethnicity.

In April 2014 an analysis was undertaken of 9,448 Implicitly® test scores from a 40-month period across 2010-2011 and 2013-2014. This specifically excluded 2012, which was the period of the London Paralympics and the increased media coverage, both before and after the Games.

The 9,448 test scores came from the following tests:

- Gender - 4534 tests
- Ethnicity – 3257 tests
- Disability – 1656 tests

The frequency of assigned test score labels was calculated so that the proportions of test takers in the LOW, MID-RANGE, ELEVATED and HIGH score label bands could be compared across tests.

An examination was made of the Disability test data from the period 2010-2011 with the test data from 2013-14. By comparing the data from before the Paralympics with a period after the Paralympics, it

was possible to compare both score label frequencies and actual test scores for the two periods. Statistical tests for differences in the test scores for the two time periods were then carried out.

### Notes

The data set included some data from people who had taken more than one test (e.g. Disability and Gender) but most test takers had taken just one of the target tests.

Implicitly® uses visual images to measure bias so only images of people with visible disabilities were used. We recognise that disabilities and impairments are not always obvious, but the visual nature of the test means other types of disability could not be represented accurately.

The sample was taken from the main anonymised database of test scores across a wide range of employers including financial services (including banking and insurance), engineering, professional services, transport and policing.

Test takers were located mainly in the UK but some were in mainland Europe (France, Germany, Switzerland) and the USA, and a small number in Dubai. All were fluent English speakers.

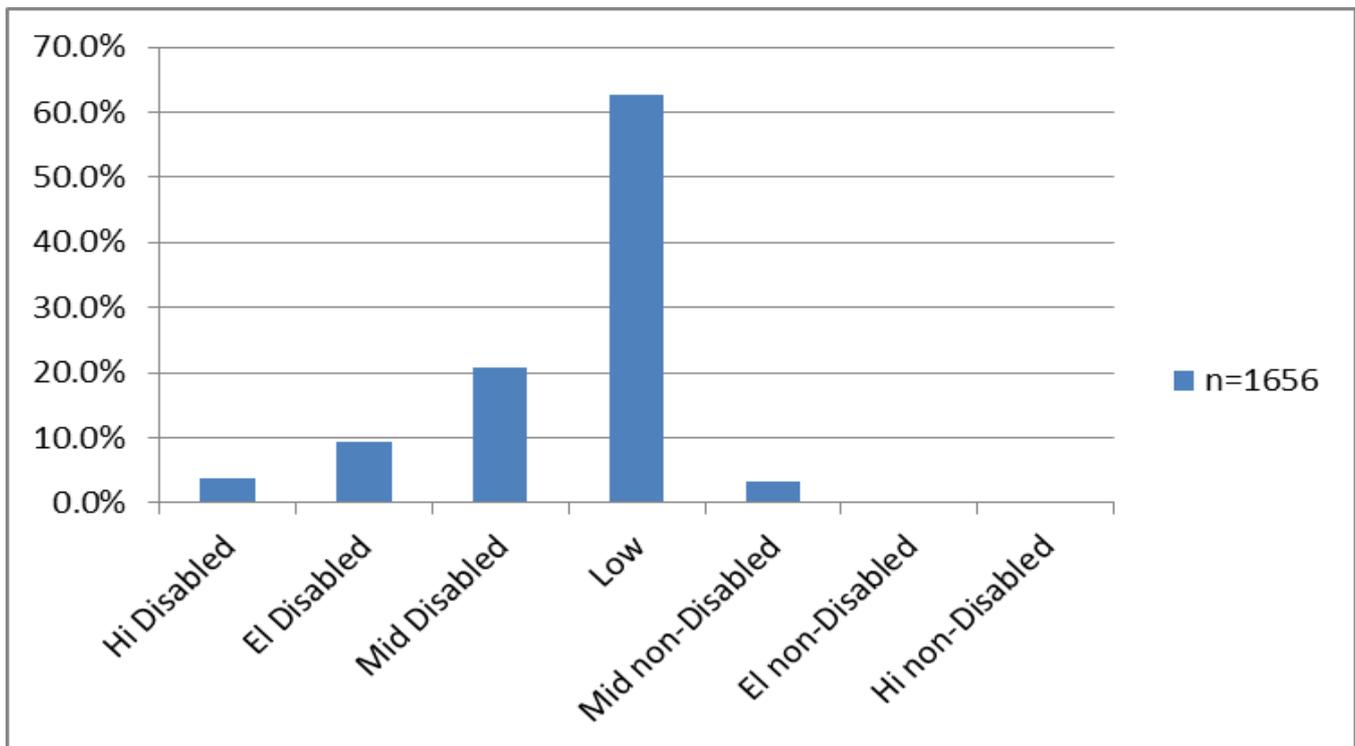
The data was screened so that tests were removed if they fell outside the strict parameters for validation, notably that error rates and the numbers of overly slow responses did not exceed 10% of the test responses. Normally manual validation would have allowed some of these scores to be validated but the volume of tests precluded manual validation.

It should be noted that the demographic data for test takers was not recorded or analysed. This means that we cannot say what proportions of a group had biases towards another group and vice versa. Although some observers may find this data interesting or useful, it also runs the risk of stereotyping some groups as the perpetrators of bias behaviour and some groups as the victims. In reality the data is never that clear cut and we do see both 'other' group and own group bias in all samples. Therefore Implicitly® tests do not request demographic information which would allow this break down.

## 2. Findings

### 2.1 Disability Test

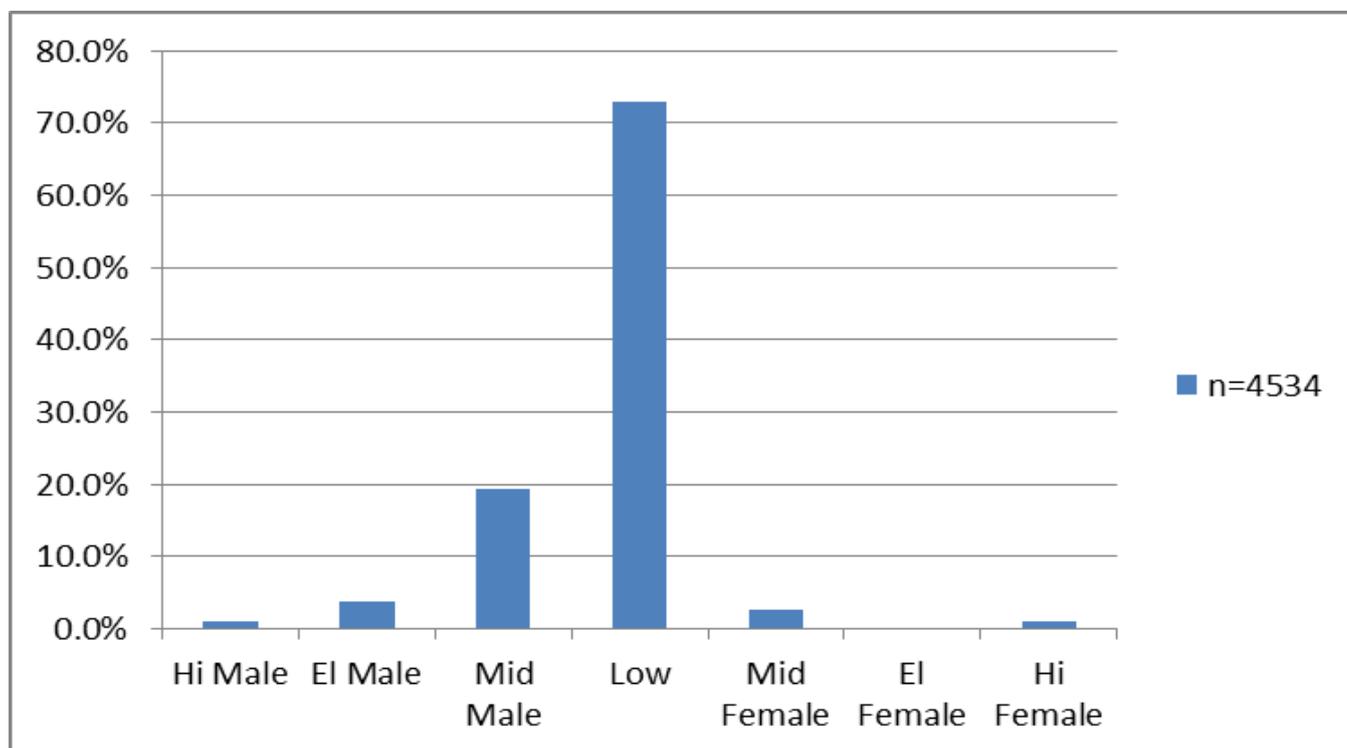
Disabled - Non Disabled: N=1656*						
Very Strong	Strong	Moderate		Moderate	Strong	Very Strong
High (Inv.)	Elev. (inv.)	Mid (Inv.)	LOW	Mid	Elev.	High
3.9%	9.4%	20.8%	62.6%	3.2%	0.1%	0.1%
Bias in favour of non-disabled people over people with a disability			↔	Bias in favour of people with a disability over non-disabled people		
*These results include a small number of tests (N=21) where the exact date of testing is unknown						



These results indicate that 37.4% of the sample had a bias for or against Disabled people, which was either Moderate, Strong or Very Strong and that by far the largest proportion of that bias (92%) was exercised in favour of those without a disability and was bias against people with disabilities.

## 2.2 Gender Test

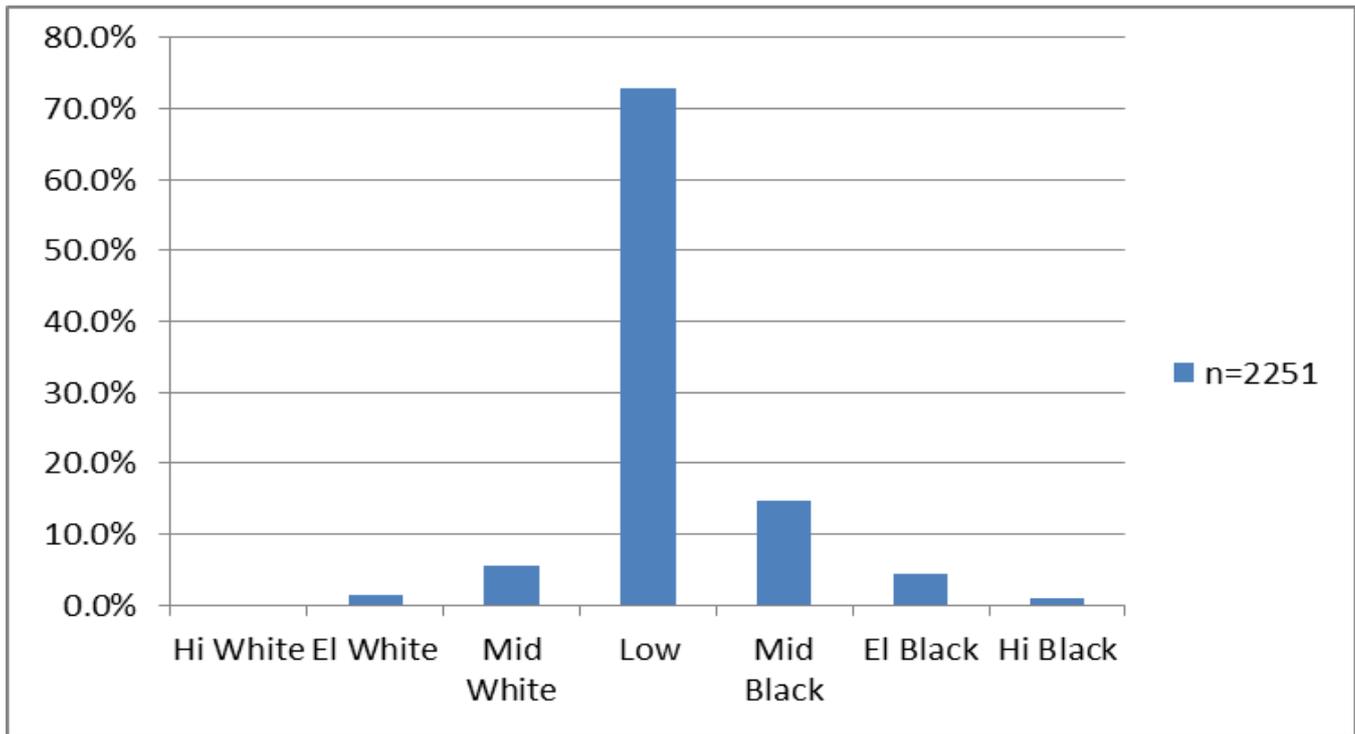
Gender Value: N=4534						
Very Strong	Strong	Moderate		Moderate	Strong	Very Strong
High (Inv.)	Elev. (inv.)	Mid (Inv.)	LOW	Mid	Elev.	High
1.0%	3.8%	19.4%	72.9%	2.6%	0%	0%
Bias in favour of seeing Women as more competent/valuable than men at work			↔	Bias in favour of seeing Men as more competent/valuable than Women at work		



The Gender Value test looks at associations around how valuable and competent we see different gender groups. Almost three out of four people had a LOW score (72.9%) and 27.1% of the sample had a bias, which, was either Moderate, Strong, or Very Strong. The largest proportion of that bias (90%) was in favour as seeing women as more competent/valuable. This is at odds with what people observe in what is supposed to be a modern business meritocracy, where men are often seen to progress more quickly. What we may be seeing here is that women are implicitly seen as 'competent supporters' but not as corporate leaders. A new test has recently been launched to explore this Gender-Leadership association. We see lower levels of bias towards Gender groups than toward people with disabilities in the proportion of Mid, Elevated and High scores.

2.3 Ethnicity Test White/Black Test

Ethnicity: White/Black N=2251						
Very Strong	Strong	Moderate		Moderate	Strong	Very Strong
High (Inv.)	Elev. (inv.)	Mid (Inv.)	LOW	Mid	Elev.	High
0%	1.4%	5.6%	72.9%	14.8%	4.3%	0.9%
Bias in favour of Black over White people			↔	Bias in favour of White over Black people		



The majority (72.9%) of test scores were in the LOW range and the remaining biases mainly in the MID RANGE. The skew in data showing bias against Black people does not reach the levels of bias we saw on the basis of Disability and shows identical proportions of stronger biases on the basis of Gender (72.9% get LOW scores in both Gender and Ethnicity (White/Black) bias tests.)

The level of bias on the White/Black test is higher than on similar tests comparing White people with other ethnic minorities, such as South East Asian and Asian groups, as indicated below.

Ethnicity: White- South East Asian (Chinese et al) N=327						
Very Strong	Strong	Moderate		Moderate	Strong	Very Strong
High (Inv.)	Elev. (inv.)	Mid (Inv.)	LOW	Mid	Elev.	High
0%	0%	4.9%	86.2%	8.9%	0%	0%
Bias in favour of South East Asian people over White people			↔	Bias in favour of White people over South East Asian people		

The large proportion (86.2%) of test scores were in the LOW range and the remaining biases were in the MID RANGE with this 13.8% of the sample being split roughly 2:1 towards bias in favour of White people over South East Asian people.

Ethnicity: Asian-White N=679						
Very Strong	Strong	Moderate		Moderate	Strong	Very Strong
High (Inv.)	Elev. (inv.)	Mid (Inv.)	LOW	Mid	Elev.	High
0.6%	1.0%	13.7%	70.5%	13.7%	0.3%	0%
Bias in favour of White over Asian people			↔	Bias in favour of Asian over White people		

The majority (70.5%) of test scores were in the LOW range and the remaining biases mainly in the MID RANGE with this 27.4% of the sample being split roughly equally in terms of the direction of the bias. Only 1.9% had stronger biases.

## 2.4 The Paralympics Effect

Much has been made in the media of the positive attitude effect of the 2012 London Paralympics, suggesting that the positive role models seen across TV screens had reduced bias against people with disabilities. The research suggests that the Paralympics has had a positive effect on the way the general public perceives people with disabilities. Additional research suggests that positive role models can mitigate against unconscious bias, so an increase in positive role models should translate into a reduction of bias. Data for this study was chosen to detect any change in bias towards people with disabilities and data from 2012 was deliberately omitted so as to avoid any short term effects which were perhaps not sustained, and to avoid any effects from the wider London 2012 Olympic programme.

### Disability test before the 2012 Paralympics

Pre Paralympics Disability 2010-2011 N=896						
Very Strong	Strong	Moderate		Moderate	Strong	Very Strong
High (Inv.)	Elev. (inv.)	Mid (Inv.)	LOW	Mid	Elev.	High
4.2%	8.5%	19.1%	64.9%	2.9%	0%	0%
Bias in favour of non-disabled people over people with a disability			↔	Bias in favour of people with a disability over non-disabled people		

### Disability test after the 2012 Paralympics

Post Paralympics Disability 2013-2014: N=566						
Very Strong	Strong	Moderate		Moderate	Strong	Very Strong
High (Inv.)	Elev. (inv.)	Mid (Inv.)	LOW	Mid	Elev.	High
3.5%	11.1%	24.9%	56.0%	3.7%	0%	0%
Bias in favour of non-disabled people over people with a disability			↔	Bias in favour of people with a disability over non-disabled people		

A statistical test for differences in the test scores for the two time periods was carried out. This found a statistically significant difference between test scores before and after the Paralympics with bias test scores increasing after the Paralympics ( $T=-2.088$ ;  $P=.037$ ). These results suggest that rather than the Paralympics leading to a decrease in unconscious bias levels, that bias levels have actually increased slightly in this sample over the period. Although the design of the study did not track individuals before and post the Paralympics it did use large samples ( $N=1462$ ) across the two time periods. The actual increase in bias scores is small (typically 10% rise in scores) but the effect is a decrease from 64.9% to 56.0% in the proportion of people getting LOW scores although some of this is a small increase in pro-disability bias (3.7% from 2.9%).

## 2.5 Discussion

This study revealed a skew in the data around disability towards having an unconscious bias in favour of seeing people with disability as less valuable at work when compared to people without a disability. In a sample of 1656 people 34.1% (one in three people) were found to have an unconscious bias against people with disabilities compared to 27.1% on the basis of Gender. This compares to just 8.9% having a bias against those with a South East Asian ethnic origin, 13.7% towards people of an Asian ethnic origin and 14.8% towards those whose ethnic origin was Black.

One explanation put forward for such high bias levels against people with disabilities in the workplace is the way in which decision makers are exposed to negative experiences and how well intentioned positive action interventions may support negative associations being created or reinforced. For example in a selection context the 'two ticks' guaranteed interview scheme might project negative associations between people with disabilities and competence. At work, the effort required to make 'reasonable adjustments' and systems for grievance handling may lead to managers associating disability with additional effort or anxiety which can trigger bias.

When compared to other observable individual differences (in this case Gender and Ethnicity) we see that larger proportions of test takers get the higher test scores, indicating a tendency towards bias affecting behaviour (micro-inequities).

Counter to media speculation and popular belief, the period after the 2012 Paralympics was not a time when we saw a reduction in unconscious bias towards people with disabilities and test scores actually rose slightly in the post Paralympics period (2013-14). This supports the latest research from Scope<sup>25</sup>, which shows that 22% of disabled people are of the opinion that people's attitudes towards them as a disabled person have worsened following the 2012 Paralympian Games.

This suggests that whilst peoples' perceptions and attitudes towards disabled people may be changing at the conscious level, individuals continue to hold ingrained and deep-rooted negative assumptions about disabled people.

There are a number of reasons why this may be. We know that we can observe a 'backlash' effect when people feel pressured into behaving in a particular way, for example by media attention to people with disabilities. We also know that we can activate stereotypes for use by talking about them (the 'ironic rebound effect'). Both of these phenomena were evident in the UK in 2012. We also know that we tend to remember negative things about people who are less like us and the UK media has had a number of TV programmes which may have portrayed people with disabilities in a negative light (E.g. 'Saints and Scroungers'), albeit alongside some positive images which our biases are inclined to screen out. This background noise makes it very difficult to say coverage of the Paralympics caused the moderate rise in test scores we observed.

N.B. This research has focused on bias against those with an obvious physical disability due to the nature of the testing available. However it should be noted that people with other forms of disability e.g. non-visible physical disabilities or learning disabilities are likely to experience bias once their disability is revealed.

## 2.6 Impact at Work

The impact of these unconscious biases against disabled people is wide-ranging in the workplace. Where a disabled person has an individual with unconscious biases against them in a decision-making role, they will be put at a disadvantage in the following areas:

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<sup>25</sup> Scope May 2014 Current Attitudes Towards Disabled People

- Recruitment and selection – by recruiters who may believe disabled people are not competent or too difficult or expensive to recruit.
- Training and development – by line managers who do not feel comfortable talking to disabled people or have negative attitudes about their abilities and therefore do not allocate stretching work, put them forward for projects or promotions and work to develop them in the same way as their peers.
- Communication and engagement - by line managers and leaders who do not feel confident talking to disabled people.

The effect may be subtle or may be significant, but if it is not addressed people with disabilities will not be given the same opportunities as their peers and employers will lose talented people to their more inclusive competitors.

### **3. Recommendations**

enei recommend that employers take the following actions to reduce the impact of unconscious bias against disabled people in the workplace:

- Measure the unconscious bias of recruiters and key decision makers to raise awareness of bias, as understanding your own biases, learning how to overcome them whilst having the right tools and support in place, is key to removing barriers for disabled people.
- Encourage recruiters to put forward more candidates with disabilities to break down stereotypes and build more role models.
- Review positive action programmes and the process for agreeing reasonable adjustments for the risks of triggering stereotypes amongst decision makers, the staff (including staff with disabilities) and the public.
- Consider confining work on reasonable adjustments to a small group of staff to minimise the exposure to staff who don't understand the process and could make negative assumptions about the cost and impact.
- Avoid 'talking up' the impact of interventions which were thought to make disability bias less likely until the hard evidence is to hand as there is a risk of 'back-lash' effects.
- Review the impact of disability initiatives such as 'two ticks' and the 'disability confidence campaign' to ensure they are producing long term and lasting effects on the experiences of disabled people.
- Use positive disabled role models to show the positive effect disabled people can have at work. Focus on their achievements at work and not on their disability.
- Encourage honest discussions about disability in the workplace. Train line managers about different types of disabilities and how to talk to someone about their disability, giving them the confidence to have effective communication with different types of people.
- Review approach to reasonable adjustments to allow provision for extra help, reduced or different hours, reduced workload or different duties.
- Make sure key people in the organisation are aware of Access to Work, the support offered and the funding that may be available.
- Monitor disability within the workforce to gain management information to help inform future decision-making. At a minimum monitor disability:
  - At recruitment stage
  - Of staff with different performance ratings
  - Of Leavers