Confirmation Bias

Confirmation bias is our tendency to look for, notice and remember information that supports what we already believe. The psychologist Daniel Kahneman explains that our fast, automatic thinking likes a story that fits and rarely searches for facts that could break it. At work, this bias can lead to poor hiring, weak investments and projects that continue for too long. The good news is that a few simple habits can reduce it.

1. The 2-4-6 Task

In 1960, the British psychologist Peter Wason showed people three numbers, 2, 4 and 6, which followed a secret rule. Most people guessed a rule such as numbers going up by two, and tested only sets that fitted it, like 8, 10 and 12. The real rule was simply any three rising numbers, and few people named it at the first attempt, because they rarely tested a set that could prove their idea wrong.

Example: A shopper believes that a favourite brand is the best and reads only the five-star reviews. Like the people in the 2-4-6 task, the shopper never tests the idea.

At work: Shahd, a recruitment manager, meets a candidate from her own university and likes him at once. Like a player in the 2-4-6 task, she asks only questions that confirm her first impression.

2. Search, Interpret, Remember

Confirmation bias works in three ways. First, we search for information that agrees with us, such as news that shares our views. Second, we interpret unclear facts in our favour, so the same report can look good or bad. Third, we remember the hits and forget the misses.

Example: A football fan sees every referee decision against the team as unfair. Searching, interpreting and remembering with bias, the fan recalls only the bad calls.

At work: In the interview, the candidate gives a vague answer about teamwork. Shahd interprets it in his favour as modesty, and later remembers only his strong answers.

3. Ask What Would Prove Us Wrong

The first way to counter the bias is to look on purpose for evidence against our idea. Before deciding, we can ask what we would expect to see if our idea were wrong. Then we search for exactly that, just as the 2-4-6 rule is found by testing sets that do not fit.

Example: Before buying, the shopper asks what would prove the brand wrong and reads the one-star reviews. Several mention the same broken part, so the shopper chooses another model.

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At work: Shahd asks what would prove her first impression wrong. She calls a former manager of the candidate, asks about teamwork, and hears that he often worked alone.

4. Set Criteria Before the Facts

The second way is to decide how we will judge before we see the facts. Clear criteria, agreed in advance, make it harder to bend the rules for a favourite option. Structured interviews, with the same questions and scoring for every candidate, are a good example.

Example: A family agrees on a budget and three must-haves before visiting any flats. Because the criteria come before the facts, a beautiful view cannot hide a tiny kitchen.

At work: For the next round, Shahd sets the criteria before the facts: the same five questions and one scoring sheet for every candidate. Another candidate now scores higher on teamwork.

5. Invite Other Views

The third way is to invite people who see things differently. Some teams give one person the role of devil's advocate, whose job is to argue against the favourite option. This works best when people feel safe to disagree.

Example: Before booking a group holiday, a friend invites the most doubtful member to find weak points. The trip moves to a quieter and cheaper week.

At work: Shahd invites other views: a team colleague joins the final interviews and argues against each favourite. Together they hire the candidate with the strongest evidence, not the best first impression.

Conclusion

In summary, confirmation bias makes us search for, interpret and remember facts that support our beliefs, as Wason's 2-4-6 task showed. We can counter it by asking what would prove us wrong, setting criteria before the facts, and inviting other views. Before an important decision, one question helps: what evidence would change our mind?

Sources

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