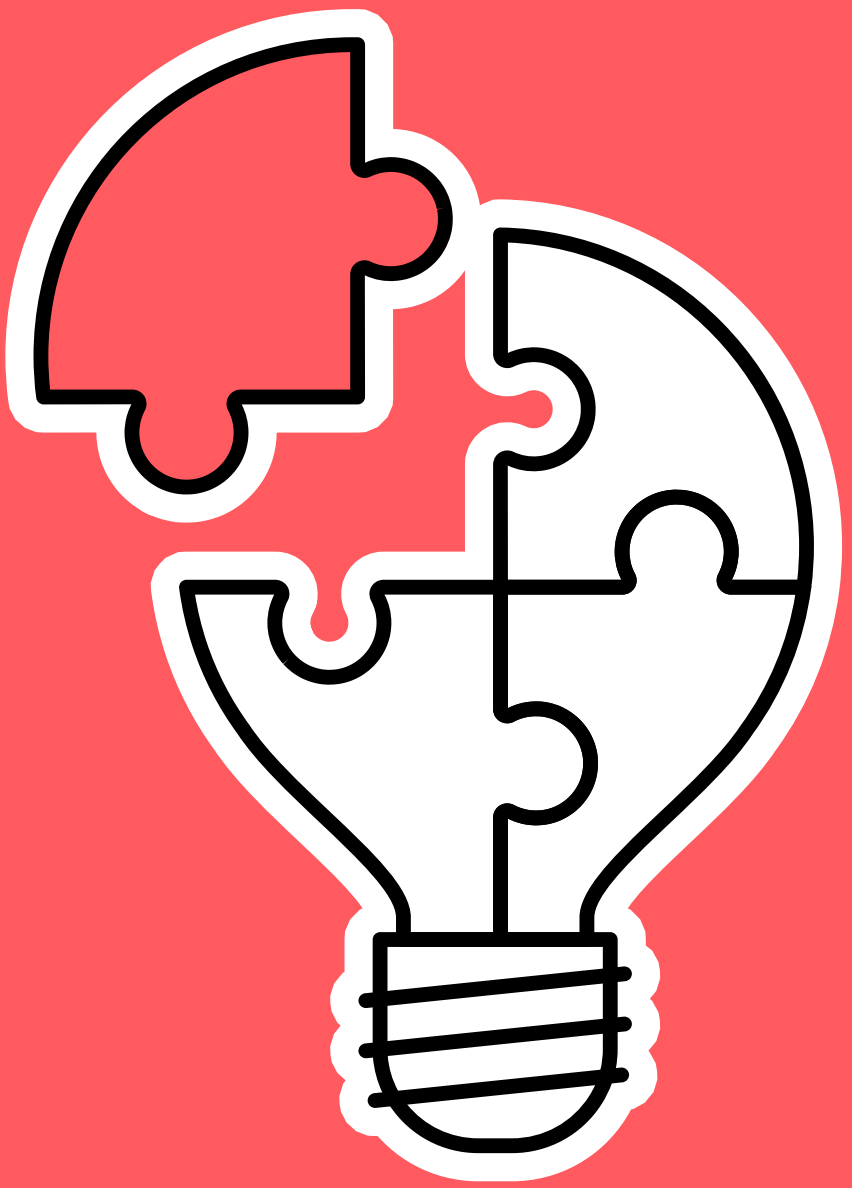
SUE | Behavioural Design Academy

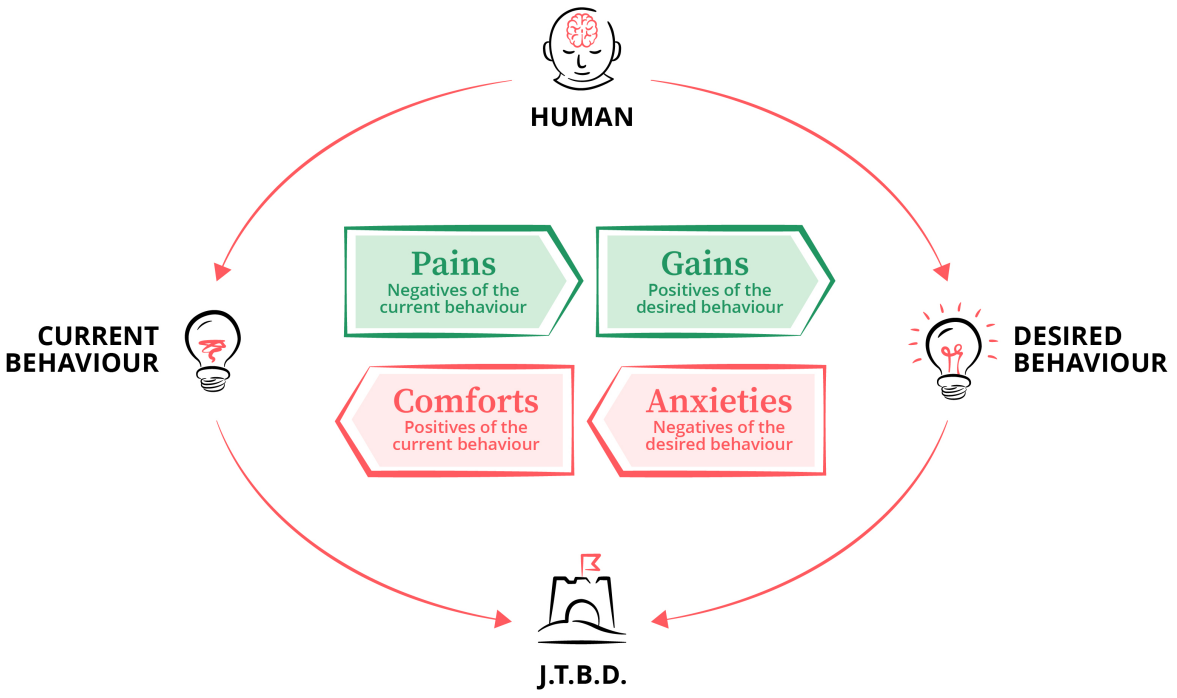
# 10 Biases in HR

*(a mini-masterclass about the unconscious thinking biases we all fall into and how to overcome them.)*



# What you'll learn

- Explanation of the 10 most common biases (unconscious thinking errors)
- Discover how these show up in HR.
- 10 Real-life examples.
- Identify the root causes.
- 10 strategies to outsmart biases in HR.
- Learn to apply the power of Behavioural Design in HR yourself.



# Introduction

As an HR professional, you make important decisions about people every single day — from recruitment and performance reviews to talent development and team restructuring. And no matter how objective you try to be — or how experienced you are — none of us are completely free from thinking errors. Myself included.

Our brains use cognitive biases as shortcuts to help us make sense of the world quickly. Most of the time, that works just fine. But in an HR context, those same biases can cloud your judgement, unintentionally lead to unfairness, and even stand in the way of building truly inclusive workplaces.

That's why I created this mini-masterclass. It walks you through 10 common biases that often show up in HR decision-making. Not to point fingers, but to help you sharpen your thinking.

*Because once you start spotting these biases, you're in a much better position to avoid them — and to make more thoughtful, fair and effective decisions.*

Happy reading!

Astrid Groenewegen

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# 1. Confirmation Bias

You look for what you already believe.

*Confirmation bias is our unconscious tendency to notice, trust, and remember information that supports what we already believe. Our brain craves consistency — it feels safe. So when we come across information that challenges our views, we're more likely to dismiss it as uncomfortable or unreliable.*

### How it can show up in HR:

As a recruiter, you often form an impression based on a CV. If it's positive, you're likely to notice strengths during the interview. If it's negative, weaknesses stand out — and you may overlook real potential.

The same goes for performance reviews: managers tend to recall situations that confirm their existing view of an employee, while easily missing other — possibly more important — evidence.

### How this might play out in practice:

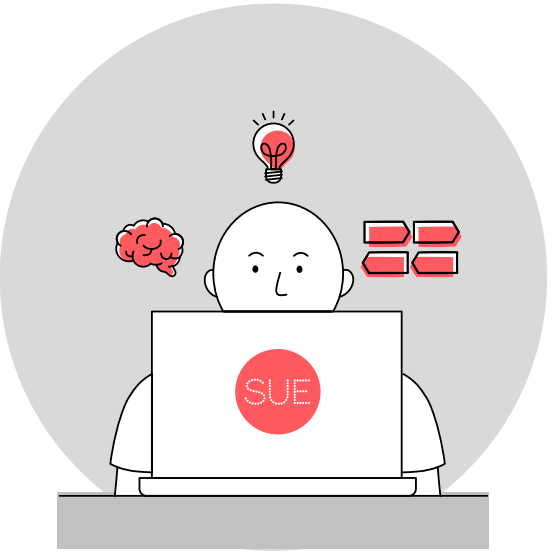
Imagine a recruitment team at a mid-sized company. They might not notice it at first, but candidates with a certain type of work experience consistently make it further in the process — regardless of their other qualifications.

Ask the recruiters why, and they'll often point to their "instinct" or "experience" with what tends to work in the organisation.

But what if you ran a blind selection experiment and removed that specific experience from the CVs? Chances are, you'd end up with a much more diverse shortlist — filled with candidates who are just as qualified. A clear example of how confirmation bias can shape the selection process, even when you believe you're being objective.

### What it leads to:

It creates tunnel vision in people decisions. Because you're unconsciously looking for confirmation of what you already believe, you miss alternative perspectives — and with them, talent that doesn't fit your usual mould. The result? A team with limited diversity in thought and experience — which can seriously weaken innovation and problem-solving capacity.



# 2. Status Quo Bias

Favouring the familiar over the better option

*We instinctively stick to what we know, even when change would make more sense. Change often feels uncomfortable — partly due to loss aversion: the idea that losing something hurts more than gaining something new feels good. Add to that our brain's preference for mental shortcuts, and familiar choices simply feel easier to make.*

### How it can show up in HR:

A team is discussing the introduction of a new performance management system. On paper, it clearly offers improvements over the current one. Still, the HR director hesitates: "Our current system might not be perfect, but at least everyone understands it."So the team sticks with the old approach — despite its flaws. Because change means training, hassle, and temporary discomfort.

### How this might play out in practice:

An HR department might stick with an outdated performance review model for years — even when research clearly shows that a more coaching-based approach leads to better results and higher satisfaction.

The change keeps getting postponed with reasons like: "We need to optimise the current process first" or "Our managers are already overloaded."

But after an employee engagement survey reveals widespread frustration with the system, follow-up conversations uncover something else. The real reason for the delay? The old system felt familiar — flaws and all. The new one, despite its proven benefits, felt uncertain and risky.

### What it leads to:

That's how you end up missing opportunities to improve both the employee experience and your organisation's effectiveness. Not because better options don't exist, but because change feels risky — and the status quo feels safe. And that's exactly what keeps HR stuck in outdated routines that no longer serve your people or your organisation.

# 3. Anchoring Bias

The first number sticks.

*As soon as we hear a first number, estimate or idea, we unconsciously lock it in as a reference point — even if it's completely unfounded. From there, we only make small adjustments, but that starting point keeps steering our judgement.*

### How it can show up in HR:

During salary negotiations, an HR manager says: "We're thinking somewhere around €45,000 for this role." Even if market data suggests €50,000 to €55,000 would be more appropriate, the conversation now revolves around small adjustments from that anchor. The same thing happens with performance reviews: last year's score becomes the unconscious starting point, and only slight changes from it feel acceptable — even when a much higher or lower rating would be justified.

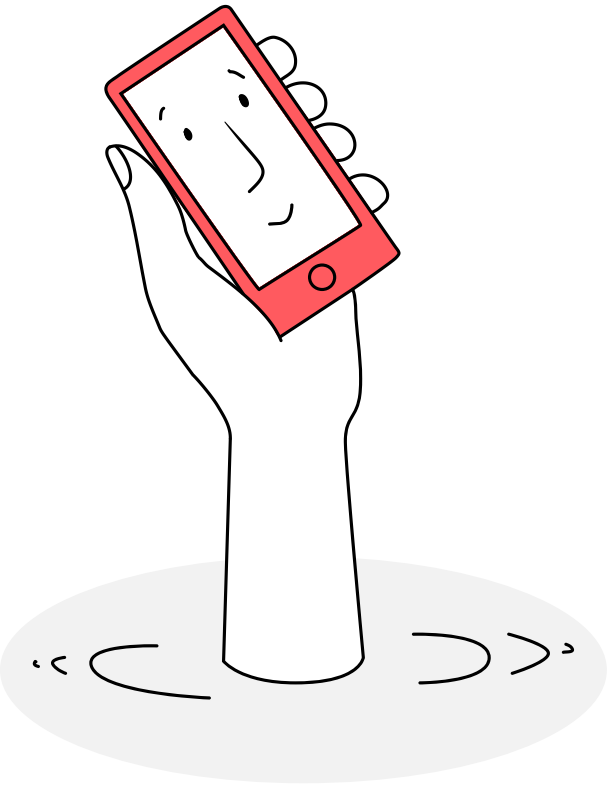
### How this might play out in practice:

Imagine your HR team runs an experiment: you split the reviewers into two groups. One group receives evaluation forms with the employee's previous score clearly shown at the top. The other group gets identical forms — but without any reference to past performance.

The outcome? In the first group, new scores stay noticeably close to the previous ones — perhaps slightly higher or lower. In the second group, there's much more variation, and the ratings align more closely with current performance. A clear example of how strongly the anchoring effect can shape your view — even when you believe you're being objective.

### What it leads to:

Reward decisions get skewed — not based on market data or merit, but on an arbitrary starting point. Performance reviews stall: real improvement or decline goes unnoticed. That initial reference weighs more heavily than the facts, leading to outcomes that feel unfair to those who genuinely made a difference.



# 4. Availability Bias

What comes to mind feels most important.

*Our brain likes the easy route. That's why we tend to rely on information that comes to mind quickly — like recent, striking or emotional events. The result? We overestimate how important those moments are, simply because they're easier to remember.*

### How it can show up in HR:

An employee makes a major mistake just before their annual review — and suddenly that one moment outweighs eleven months of solid, reliable work. The recent incident colours the entire evaluation.

The reverse happens too: a candidate who unconsciously reminds the interviewer of a previous star hire is rated more favourably — not because of what they demonstrate, but because of that positive association.

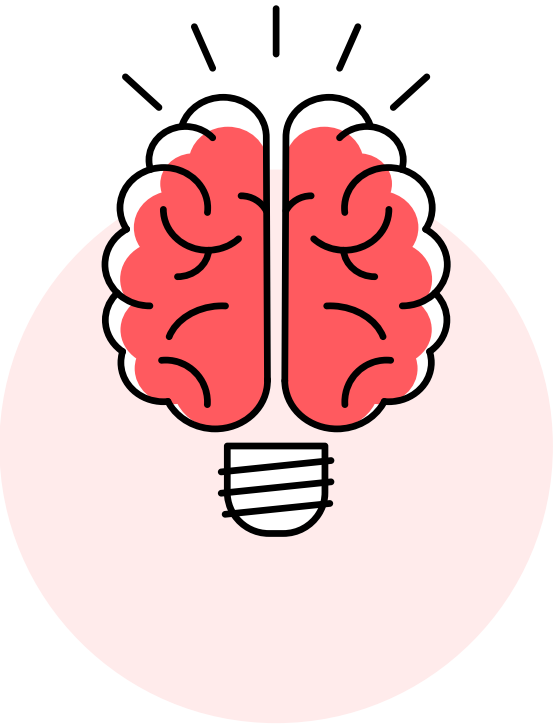
### How this might play out in practice:

A large IT company discovers that employees who work on high-profile, visible projects just before review time consistently receive higher ratings than colleagues who perform steadily throughout the year on less visible — but equally important — work.

An analysis reveals that recent performance carries more weight than it should. By switching to a system where managers document performance quarterly and refer to those notes during annual reviews, a much fairer picture emerges — one where even the quiet contributors finally receive the recognition they deserve.

### What it leads to:

What sticks in our memory tends to carry the most weight — even if it doesn't truly reflect someone's performance or potential. Recent events can distort performance reviews, and in recruitment, random similarities may count more than real qualifications. The result? Assessments that aren't fair and decisions that don't always bring in the best people.



# 5. Groupthink

No one wants to rock the boat.

*Groupthink arises when the desire to agree outweighs the need for open, critical discussion. In close-knit or hierarchical teams, speaking up can feel risky — so valuable dissent often stays unspoken.*

### How it can show up in HR:

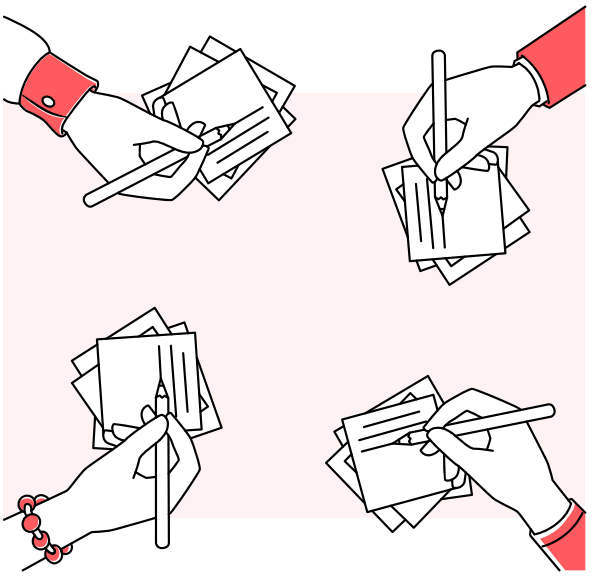
An HR team is discussing a restructuring proposal handed down from above. Several team members have concerns about the impact on motivation and workload, but because the manager is clearly enthusiastic and no one wants to be seen as difficult, no one speaks up. There's mostly nodding and agreement: "Yes, this seems like the best way forward." Later, it becomes clear that many of those concerns were widely shared — but people stayed quiet to preserve group harmony. A clear example of how groupthink can quietly lead to ineffective decisions.

### How this might play out in practice:

An HR team is working on introducing a new performance review system. The HR director clearly favours an external model they've used successfully in the past. During the meeting, team members nod along in agreement — even though some have doubts. The system may not fit the organisation's culture and could be difficult for managers to understand and apply. Yet these concerns go unspoken — no one wants to disrupt the atmosphere or be seen as the 'difficult one'. The new system is rolled out, but it meets resistance across the organisation. Managers grow frustrated, employees don't understand it, and the HR team later wonders why no one spoke up in time. A classic case of groupthink: the urge to agree proved stronger than the courage to voice doubt.

### What it leads to:

The illusion of consensus leads to decisions being made without proper scrutiny. Critical voices stay silent, and fresh ideas never make it to the table. The result? Hiring decisions that miss the mark, HR initiatives with little impact, and missed opportunities to truly meet the needs of your people.



# 6. Sunk Cost Fallacy

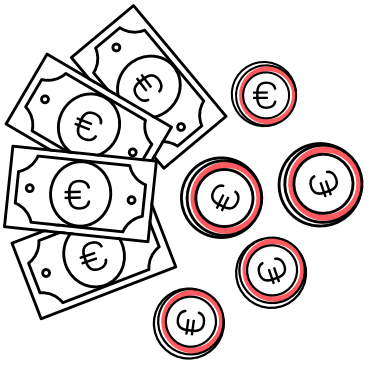
ecause we've already invested so much in it.

*The sunk cost fallacy makes us keep investing in something simply because we've already put in a lot of time, money, or effort — even when stopping would make more sense. We don't want to admit a loss, so we throw even more at it to justify our earlier decisions.*

## How it can show up in HR:

An L&D team keeps running a training programme, even though feedback has been poor for a while and the impact is minimal. "We've put so much into this — we can't just drop it now."

The same happens in recruitment: a hiring manager insists on moving forward with a candidate, despite growing concerns. "We've already invested so much time." But that doesn't make the risk any smaller — it just makes it harder to walk away.



## How this might play out in practice:

A large company might invest heavily in developing an extensive leadership programme. After the first few cohorts, feedback is mixed and participants show little improvement in leadership skills. Instead of thoroughly reviewing or replacing the programme, the L&D team chooses to pour in more resources — tweaking the content and ramping up internal marketing to boost participation.

Internal notes reveal that success is repeatedly redefined, while critical feedback is downplayed. One manager writes: "We've invested too much to stop now — we have to keep going until it works."

Two years later, an external audit finds that, despite the significant investment, the programme has had little measurable impact on leadership quality. A new approach — with shorter, more targeted modules tailored to current leadership needs — proves far more effective.

## What it leads to:

Time and money keep flowing into initiatives that deliver little value. Hiring decisions still go ahead, just to avoid seeing earlier efforts as wasted. And so the organisation clings to what isn't working — when real strength lies in knowing when to stop, take the loss, and try something better.

# 7. Halo Effect

Success shines a little too brightly.

*The halo effect means that one strong trait shapes our entire perception of someone. If a person impresses us in one area, we quickly assume they're equally capable in others — often without any real evidence to support that belief.*

### How it can show up in HR:

A candidate with an impressive academic background is judged less critically on their actual skills or experience. "They went to Oxford — so they must be brilliant."

Likewise, a technically strong employee is quickly labelled as having 'leadership potential', without any real evaluation of their ability to manage people or lead a team.

### How this might play out in practice:

A tech company runs an internal analysis and spots a pattern: employees with strong technical skills are promoted to leadership roles more quickly — regardless of their people skills.

The data shows that these 'technical stars' tend to underperform as managers. Their teams have higher turnover compared to those led by colleagues selected for a broader mix of skills. Conversations reveal that standout technical talent often benefits from a halo effect, meaning key leadership qualities are judged less critically.

In response, the company introduces a separate promotion track — where technical expertise still counts, but alongside other equally important competencies.

### What it leads to:

A few standout traits quickly become a shortcut for a thorough assessment. Talent decisions get based on an impressive CV or one strong skill, without truly considering the bigger picture.

The result? People end up in roles that aren't the right fit, and opportunities for targeted development are missed — especially where support is needed most.

# 8. Loss Aversion

The fear of loss outweighs the hope of gain.

*Research shows that losing hurts about twice as much as winning feels good. That fear of loss often makes us overly cautious — even when the risk is small and the potential gain is significant.*

### How it can show up in HR:

An organisation is reviewing its flexible working policy. The data shows that a more generous approach could help retain staff and attract new talent. Yet HR focuses mainly on the risk of misuse and loss of control. The final policy ends up being so cautious that it adds little real value.

The same pattern shows up in succession planning: the familiar, 'safe' internal candidate is often favoured over an external one with greater potential — but also slightly more risk.

### How this might play out in practice:

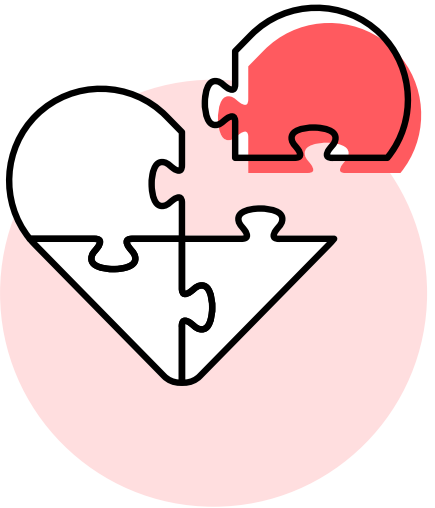
A consultancy firm might consider introducing a flexible work model, allowing employees to largely choose where and when they work. While research may suggest that such a model could improve employee satisfaction, retention, and even productivity,

Managers might instead focus on potential downsides: "What if people take advantage of the freedom?" or "How can we be sure they're actually working?" As a result, the policy could end up packed with restrictions and control measures — undermining many of the intended benefits.

Yet in a pilot where one team tests a truly flexible model with minimal limitations, the results could be strikingly positive: higher productivity, greater satisfaction, and improved work-life balance. A clear example of how loss aversion held the organisation back from making a change that could have delivered real value.

### What it leads to:

Risk avoidance becomes a barrier to progressive HR practices. Policies are designed to prevent rare negative outcomes rather than enable broader positive ones. As a result, the organisation misses out on meaningful improvements to the employee experience by focusing too heavily on what *might* go wrong.



# 9. Gambler's Fallacy

It has to get better soon.

*We often believe that luck balances itself out — that after a string of setbacks, something good has to happen. But in reality, events are usually independent of each other — what happened before doesn't predict what comes next.*

### How it can show up in HR:

After a string of poor hires, a talent acquisition specialist thinks, "Our next hire has to be a star — we're due for a win." But that optimism isn't based on improvements in the selection process — it's driven by the belief that their luck is bound to turn.

Similarly, an HR leader might respond to several quarters of declining engagement scores by saying, "These things are cyclical — it'll pick up on its own," without making any real changes to address the root causes.

### How this might play out in practice:

A consultancy firm has repeatedly found that newly hired senior employees struggle to settle into the organisation.

They often don't align with the way of working, fail to connect with the team, or become frustrated early on.

After several failed senior hires, confidence oddly increases: "This time it has to go right." Not because the evaluation process has improved, but due to a false sense of chance correction.

When this hire also fails, an external consultant is brought in — only to reveal the real issue: a lack of culture fit assessment and weak onboarding for senior roles.

### What it leads to:

You're relying on wishful thinking instead of data. HR strategies are driven by hope rather than evidence — and that leads to repeated disappointment when the expected turnaround doesn't happen.

Without solid insights, you keep doing what you hope will work, instead of what's proven to make a difference.

# 10. Dunning-Kruger Effect

Those who know the least often think they know the most.

*The Dunning-Kruger effect highlights a striking paradox: those with limited knowledge often believe they understand things well, while true experts tend to express more doubt and nuance. This mismatch can throw conversations and decision-making seriously off balance.*

### How it can show up in HR:

An HR generalist with little experience in compensation confidently designs a new bonus structure — without consulting any specialists. The compensation expert, who understands the risks, voices caution, but is seen as less convincing. The team follows the generalist, mistaking confidence for competence.

The same happens in recruitment: hiring managers without interview training believe they can judge candidates instinctively, while experienced recruiters are far more aware of how limited individual judgement can be.

### How this might play out in practice:

A study within the organisation reveals something striking: the least trained managers are the most confident in their interviewing skills. They rely on gut feeling, avoid structured interviews, and prefer informal chats.

But the data tells a different story. These confident yet untrained interviewers tend to make poorer hiring decisions — with higher turnover and lower performance among the people they select.

In contrast, experienced and trained recruiters show more nuance, rely on validated tools, and consistently make stronger hiring choices.

Since the organisation introduced mandatory interview training for everyone involved in recruitment, the quality of hires has noticeably improved.

### What it leads to:

Complex people challenges get met with quick fixes that sound good on the surface. Rather than digging into the root cause, the organisation opts for what feels simple and manageable.

As a result, valuable insights are overlooked — and the kind of expertise needed to make HR truly effective is left unused.

# 10 Strategies to Outsmart Biases in HR.

1

## Implement structured processes

Use consistent, structured approaches for recruitment, evaluation, and promotion. Structure helps minimise the impact of personal bias as much as possible.

2

## Set clear criteria in advance.

Define clear success criteria before assessing someone. This helps prevent the bar from shifting unconsciously depending on who's in front of you.

3

## Gather multiple perspectives.

Involve different stakeholders in people decisions. This brings multiple perspectives to the table and helps uncover blind spots that might otherwise go unnoticed.

4

## Use blind review processes.

Remove identifiable information from CVs or work samples wherever possible. That way, you're assessing quality — not background.

5

## Separate observation from interpretation.

Train HR professionals and managers to clearly distinguish between what they observe and the conclusions they draw. This creates space to question assumptions more critically.

## 6 Create decision-making checklists.

Develop simple checklists for key decisions. This ensures that important factors are consistently considered — no matter who's involved.

## 7 Measure outcomes, not just intentions.

Regularly review patterns in hiring, promotions, and departures. This helps uncover potential systemic biases — even when no one is acting with intent..

## 8 Encourage time for reflection.

Build in deliberate pauses during important decisions. Snap judgements are often biased, while stepping back allows for more thoughtful and fair choices.

## 9 Normalise uncertainty.

Encourage a culture where it's okay to say, "I'm not sure" or "I need more information." This reduces the pressure to appear certain and creates space for better decision-making..

## 10 Invest in bias training.

Provide regular training on cognitive biases. Awareness won't eliminate them, but it helps people recognise when those biases might be influencing their judgement.

# Learn to apply the power of Behavioural Design in HR yourself.

**Want to apply behavioural psychology principles in your HR practice?**

The Behavioural Design Fundamentals Course by SUE gives you both the scientific insights and practical tools to make smarter choices, assess more fairly, and design HR processes that truly work.

## What will you learn in our training?

- The psychological principles behind human decision-making in workplace contexts.
- How to use choice architecture to design bias-aware recruitment and evaluation processes.
- Practical methods to optimise talent acquisition and development.
- The **SUE | Influence Framework®** for systematically designing behavioural interventions.
- Immediately applicable techniques for your specific HR challenges.

## Who is this training for?

*Our training is ideal for:*

- HR professionals looking to improve talent acquisition and retention.
- Recruiters who want to eliminate bias from their selection processes.
- L&D specialists who want to design more effective development programmes.
- People managers who want to conduct fairer performance appraisals.
- HR business partners who support organisational change.
- Talent acquisition teams who want to improve the candidate experience.

SUE Behavioural Design Academy

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## Why choose SUE?

- Recognised by the Education Quality Assessment Committee (EQAC).
- Average rating of 9.7 from more than 5,000 participants across 45 + countries.
- Immediately applicable templates and tools for HR processes.
- Small groups for optimal interaction and personalised attention.
- Experienced trainers with practical Behavioural Design expertise.

## What do previous participants say?

"The training has transformed my approach to recruitment. I've redesigned our interview process using Behavioural Design principles, and we're seeing much higher-quality hires as a result.."

**- Head of Talent Acquisition at a global tech company.**

"I thought I understood how people make decisions—until I took this training. Now I have practical tools to actually influence decisions, not just observe them. Essential for every HR professional."

**- HR Director in finance.**

# Your investment.

The Behavioural Design Fundamentals Course is an investment in skills that will support you throughout your entire HR career. This training includes:

- **Two intensive training days**
- **Practical tools and templates you can use straight away**
- **Certificate of participation**
- **Access to the exclusive SUE | Behavioural Design Club**
- **6 months of online follow-up training afterwards**

## Reviews:

9,7
Springest

★★★★★
Google 4,8 out of 5

bloomville
★★★★★

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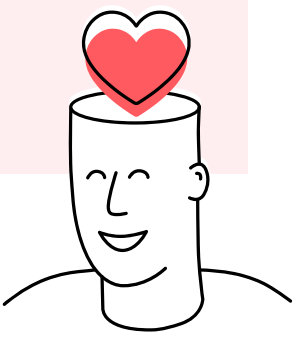

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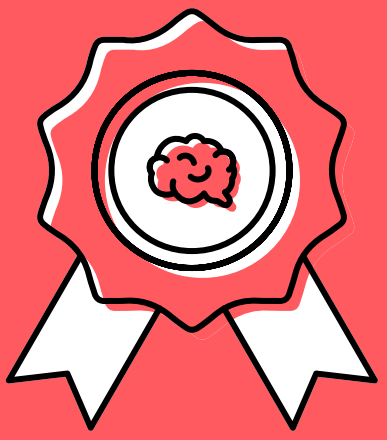

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