

# Men 'have learnt to mask sexism in workplace'

JOHN ROSS | THE AUSTRALIAN | FEBRUARY 19, 2016 12:00AM

**Unconscious bias training is a “tick-the-box exercise” that will not solve gender imbalances in the workplace, a former construction boss has warned.**

Gender equity consultant Mark Toner says the new “fad” in which company appointed trainers use psychological questionnaires to help staff recognise biases achieves little because alerting people to their unconscious beliefs is not enough to change their behaviour.

And, he says, companies underestimate the scale of deliberate sexism in the workplace, - because men have learnt to mask attitudes. Writing in the journal of the Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering, Dr Toner criticises a “superficial” assumption unconscious bias training eliminates unconscious biases.

“The real question is what are (companies) doing to assist their staff to deal with their unconscious biases, and how are they addressing the conscious biases that we are all subject to?”.

The warning comes as a looming crisis in science, technology, engineering and maths threatens to undermine the government’s “ideas boom”.

Dr Toner co-founded his consulting company, Gender Matters, after heading an engineering construction firm staffed almost exclusively by men. He said even minuscule levels of bias against women inevitably produced big workforce imbalances.

He cited US modelling that found in a company with equal numbers of male and female juniors a 1 per cent bias in promotions would lead to twice as many men as women in the senior ranks.

Unconscious bias training is a hallmark of the Male Champions of Change initiative of former sex discrimination commissioner Elizabeth Broderick.

Dr Toner said annual reports of companies such as banks and mining groups showed many were putting staff through training. “It’s a good first step,” he said.

Kate Mills, chief executive of recruitment firm Professional Mums, said the problem emerged from a view of gender diversity as a “compliance activity”.

“Unconscious bias training has become very trendy,” she said. “(But with) biases built up over a lifetime, how you change (them) is a whole different kettle of fish from being aware of them.”