

UNDERREPRESENTATION FACTSHEET

Institution of
**MECHANICAL
ENGINEERS**



Improving the world through engineering

UNDERREPRESENTATION

Introduction

You are most likely hearing this word more often in your day-to-day life, whether that be at work, on social media or even when watching tv at the end of the day. This factsheet breaks it down and will help to explain not only what it means, but also ways you can support underrepresented groups to become more fairly represented in an organisational setting.

What is Underrepresentation?

Underrepresentation means that individuals and groups within workplaces, education, and politics (among others) are disproportionately represented; meaning those employed, in learning or setting government policies do not accurately reflect the people within society.

When we are represented, we see other people like ourselves in decision making positions and in influential spaces; that allows us to be inspired to want to achieve our full potential regardless of our backgrounds.

Naturally, underrepresentation hinders the development of the underrepresented people, and the cycle continues.

Representation In Organisations

Representation in the workplace is vital as it motivates employees to be more productive and to aim for greater things, it also inspires young people to follow careers in all fields, not just the ones they see people like themselves in already.

This is because it is easier for someone to see themselves within a role when the person, they see in the job is like them – this is extremely important in the engineering field due to shortages of engineers of the future.

Examples of underrepresentation in organisations:

- In many organisations there are far less women than men in the most senior positions, even though the UK population is more than 51% women
- In a senior meeting where most attendees are from a white background, however, within the organisation (specifically within the entry level roles) there is much more of a variety of ethnicities
- There is also a lack of representation of people with disabilities promoted into more technical and senior roles, even though 19% of working adults have a disability
- A lack of LGBT+ in higher positions is also noticeable

Underrepresentation is born from itself, causing a lack of role models for the younger generation and from the bias and prejudice of others, which causes them to overlook those from other backgrounds and only hire and promote those who look like and act like themselves.

Tackling Underrepresentation

There are a few ways that an organisation can tackle the problem of underrepresentation, which in turn facilitates change and fosters further growth for the company. It is important that all groups are proportionally represented within different industries and in different roles so that people feel they truly belong.

Representation in Comms & PR

Showing all groups of your members and employees within social media posts, ads, and other organisational media helps to represent all everyone; this can increase their personal ambition and productivity as well as help others early in their careers to see people like themselves in positions they have ambitions for.

While this helps, it is not enough, and a large part of underrepresentation is the lack of diversity in higher level roles within an organisation and should not be a substitute for creating inclusive opportunities for underrepresented groups.

Offering Learning & Progression Opportunities

Some people who may seem to be missing official experience and training might just be those who haven't previously had the chance to gain this because they've been conscious or unconsciously judged for their socio-economic background, disability, race, gender, or sexuality.

To help them get the necessary experience so they can do better within their roles and be up for promotion, organisations should offer employees of all backgrounds training opportunities, with some specifically designed to help those that may have been ignored in the past.

Promoting People from Different Backgrounds

There is a high level of underrepresentation within people in senior positions. Factually, in the UK, US, and Europe most of these positions are filled by white, cisgender, middle-aged men, when the less senior levels of the company are filled with people from a much more diverse group of people.

Many people are disproportionally represented within companies which can cause them to feel uncomfortable, frustrated, and unmotivated. When all kinds of people are promoted to higher level positions then it can motivate all employees and motivate them to reach for higher positions.

Set Up Discussion Groups

Listen to your people, they will know what is best for them and they will have some fantastic and innovative ways to ensure that underrepresented groups are supported and given access to the right opportunities.

Final Thought

Whilst we refer to underrepresented groups in this factsheet, we are questioning alternative ways to express what this means. Arlan Hamilton, investor, author, founder and managing partner of Backstage Capital is helping marginalised groups to do the same.

She has helped us to look at underrepresentation in an alternative light and adds the word 'underestimated' when talking about this topic.

What an interesting way to look at this, and we want to set you the challenge of reflecting on it for a moment:

- Does changing the word resonate at all with you?
- Does it make the idea of underrepresentation have more clarity?
- If so, does it allow us to think a little more about how we can influence change?