



Understanding and Overcoming Proximity Bias in Hybrid Workplaces

In the rapidly evolving employment landscape, where remote and hybrid workplaces have become increasingly prevalent, the concept of proximity bias has emerged as a critical challenge to address. Proximity bias refers to people's inherent tendency to favor individuals who are physically closer to them in a workplace setting, often at the expense of remote or distributed team members. As more organizations embrace flexible work arrangements, potential inequalities between remote and in-office employees are a leading concern.

As more workplaces adopt hybrid work models, organizations and HR professionals will need to make a more concerted effort to recognize and mitigate proximity bias.

WHAT IS PROXIMITY BIAS?

Proximity bias is the concept that employees in close physical proximity to their team and company leaders will be favored and perceived as better workers than their remote counterparts. Furthermore, proximity bias may occur against employees who do not have frequent contact with leadership or work during peak business hours.

More professionals are recognizing that such a cognitive bias does, in fact, exist.

A key driver of proximity bias is the assumption that people are more productive in an on-site work environment than at home or other remote locations.

Those on the receiving end of proximity bias may feel neglected or not appreciated or valued in the workplace. They may also receive less support and miss opportunities that their peers receive. As a result, these employees may be discouraged and less engaged than other employees. In today's tight labor market, employers can't afford to lose remote and hybrid workers due to proximity bias or resulting poor workplace culture.

A 2023 Executive Network report found that 62% of HR leaders and 70% of business leaders agreed there is likely proximity bias toward their-person workforce.



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Proximity bias can occur at all levels of an organization—including in companywide offerings from leadership and the HR department as well as in interpersonal relationships among supervisors, managers, and employees. Here are common examples of proximity bias:

- + Providing on-site employees with access to better perks
- + Offering learning and development opportunities to on-site employees
- + Giving bonuses to on-site employees
- + Excluding remote employees from important meetings
- + Evaluating on-site employees' work more highly than remote workers, regardless of objective performance metrics
- + Assigning on-site employees with the most interesting, critical, or high-visibility projects and tasks
- + Discouraging remote employees to speak up during meetings

Supervisors and employees may not realize they are giving preferential treatment to on-site employees, so it's crucial to be aware of situations where bias can occur. Then, employees can make a conscious effort not to treat others differently based on their work location.



HOW TO REDUCE PROXIMITY BIAS

Organizations embracing hybrid work must establish systems, policies, and training to account for proximity bias. As such, employers could consider the following strategies to combat proximity bias in the workplace:

- + **Acknowledge bias.** The first step in creating an equitable workplace is determining if and where proximity bias occurs. If needed, management could receive training on proximity bias and how to best build an inclusive culture.
- + **Offer virtual events and universal perks.** If all employees don't work on-site regularly, it's wise for organizations to offer virtual options to participate in companywide events so that everyone can participate. Perks like on-site snacks and gyms don't offer much for primarily remote employees. However, discounted memberships at a national fitness center could be better utilized.
- + **Adopt a remote-first communication approach.** Whether companywide or on a team level, digital and asynchronous forms of communication should be the default method. Asynchronous communication (e.g., emails and messaging apps) doesn't happen in real-time, and the sender doesn't expect an immediate response. If one person is working remotely, everyone should act as if they are as well.
- + **Train employees about proximity bias.** Awareness can be half the battle. Once employees—especially supervisors and managers—are aware of this workplace bias, they can make conscious decisions and efforts to foster an inclusive and fair work environment throughout the workday.
- + **Reframe the conversation about working locations.** Adopting an "excellence from anywhere" strategy can help employees focus on the deliverables and business objectives rather than how or where they work. Alternatively, some organizations have adopted a remote-first approach and require all employees to work remotely at least one day a week, lessening the pressure to work on-site.
- + **Schedule frequent one-on-one meetings.** A brief weekly or biweekly meeting for supervisors to chat with their direct reports can facilitate open, two-way conversations and provide employees with personalized face time, which could help alleviate potential career mobility concerns.
- + **Encourage the use of video.** Many people have experienced "Zoom fatigue," but there is value in video conferencing during virtual meetings. When employees are on camera during meetings, colleagues and managers can see nonverbal behaviors. Not only does this help the meeting group communicate more effectively, but it can also help people get to know others better.
- + **Treat work performance like organizational goals.** Many organizations focus on key performance indicators, which can be a straightforward measure of progress and success. Supervisors could treat role responsibilities and performance in the same manner to reduce bias around career performance.

Ignoring proximity bias doesn't mean it simply goes away. Addressing and eliminating workplace proximity bias will require organizations to rethink how they approach remote and hybrid work.

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SUMMARY

As organizations trend toward remote and hybrid work, there is likely work to be done to ensure no favoritism for on-site employees. The first step to addressing proximity bias is understanding its dangerous impact on workplace culture and examples of how it occurs. With that in mind, organization leaders, supervisors, and employees can actively remove proximity bias in remote and hybrid workplaces. This can enable employees to succeed and stand out, no matter where they're working from.

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