

Why proximity bias will be the next big battle for employers

Apple recently announced the long-awaited return of employees to the office. It will gradually introduce hybrid working with a pilot scheme, starting with one day in the office in the first week, slowly progressing to two, and then three.

In an email explaining the *hybrid working pilot to Apple employees*, CEO Tim Cook seemed optimistic about the plan. He wrote, “we have an opportunity to combine the best of what we have learned about working remotely with the irreplaceable benefits of in-person collaboration”. It marks yet another large employer, one with significant potential to sway workplace trends, perhaps edging back to pre-pandemic norms with prescribed office time.

Cook is correct, it is an exciting new era of work, but in order for Apple, or any other business’s hybrid working strategy to function that well, leaders must be wary of the creeping influence of ‘proximity bias’ and the temptation to focus more on those in the physical workplace than working from home.

What is proximity bias?

Proximity bias is a form of worker favouritism, the act of giving preferential treatment to those who are physically closest to us. The often unintentional

consequence of such is that within a hybrid working model, remote workers lose out.

There are several ways proximity bias may present itself in the workplace. A few to look out for are:

The effort put into relationships – Are managers, or even other employees, putting as much effort into their relationships with remote workers as those in the same physical space?

Training and development opportunities – Sometimes, if no virtual alternative is offered, or the remote connection tools are lacking, people working from home can miss out on quality networking, training and development opportunities.

Being considered for promotions – Unfairly, leaders or decision-makers impacted by proximity bias may be inclined to offer promotions or chances to advance to those in the workplace first. This is based on a flawed need to associate physical presence with performance.

Signs of ‘presenteeism’ – As previously mentioned, some people equate turning up to the workplace with high performance. Known as ‘presenteeism’, this is a symptom of proximity bias and an indicator that a business, or individual, needs to re-assess how they measure success – is it determined by attendance or actual output?

When felt, proximity bias can cause a rift between remote workers or those in the workplace. Dejected remote workers may struggle with motivation, fulfilment or progression in their work. Plus, it negatively impacts upon organisational culture, and the wellbeing of both individual employees and the workforce as a collective. Proximity bias has no place within an engaged, purposeful and community-based organisation.

How to battle proximity bias

In a 2020 YouGov survey, 57% of respondents expressed that they wanted to be able to continue working from home after the Covid-19 pandemic. With such proportions expecting flexible working options, most businesses will need to consider hybrid working due to sheer demand. Thus, no workplace will be free from the threat of proximity bias.

Leaders must learn to challenge the entrenched ideas of what the working day should look like, and to detect and combat the influence of proximity bias. Several ways to approach this are:

Work on self-awareness – Although seemingly obvious, greater self-awareness helps people to identify and catch their own biases before they translate into behaviour. There are several structured ways to improve self-awareness such as Goleman's *theory of emotional intelligence* and *Johari's window model*. Both frameworks are a methodical way to enhance soft skills.

Consciously establish new working patterns – Making intentional changes to facilitate remote workers will ease the transition to hybrid working. Physical meetings should hold less precedent, with phone calls or video conferencing used instead. Decision-making can become more accessible, offering more chances for collaboration over a greater period of time. Using technology should also be prioritised, and decisions should no longer be a one-meeting event.

Undertake unconscious bias training – Not be done in isolation as a quick fix, successful unconscious bias training educates people about undetected stereotypes and highlights when they might occur in the workplace. At their best they provide safe spaces for people to have open conversations, ask questions and share their experiences.

Create opportunities for regular check-ins – Preventing proximity bias should be informed by open and continuous dialogue between employees and leaders. Managers should develop systems to ensure regular connection with all team members, regardless of their location. This way they ensure that they can balance time spent on remote workers and those in the office and assess whether praise, training and development are given equally to both groups.

As hybrid working's flexibility remains popular, workplaces will need to adapt and embrace it. However, it will be difficult for businesses to challenge standards that have ruled the workplace for decades, and proximity bias is a symptom of that. Therefore, going forward, it should be the priority of leaders to set an example and pioneer both new practices and perspectives in the professional world.

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