Preventing Proximity Bias in the Hybrid Workplace

When offices reopen, some remote employees are worried they'll be left behind. Here are five ways to avoid that.

Research shows that 48 percent of employees prefer to work remotely at least part of the time after the pandemic, but should they?

In the last 18 months, nearly every knowledge worker became a remote worker. These employees were forced to join meetings virtually, communicate online, schedule time with managers, and overcome the same types of remote work challenges.

But soon the playing field at work will change again.

When offices reopen and organizations transition to hybrid work, some employees will return to the workplace full time, some will stay remote, and others will split time between remote and on-site work. With different schedules, locations and technologies at play, it will become harder for remote employees to be seen or heard than when everyone was working from home.

Being in the same physical building together, on-site employees will naturally have more face time with managers than their remote counterparts as well as the ability to join off-the-cuff, "water cooler" type conversations. According to HR Magazine, one-third of 18-to-24-year olds — and 21 percent of employees overall — are concerned about proximity bias and missing out on career progression opportunities because of remote work.

21%
of employees are concerned about proximity bias
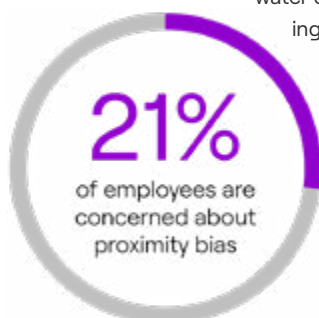
The good news is that proximity bias is preventable.

By transforming the digital workspace and being cognizant of potential favoritism toward on-site employees, organizations can foster an inclusive hybrid workplace culture where everyone has an equal voice and opportunity.

What is proximity bias?

Proximity bias is the idea that on-site employees will be favored over remote employees due to their close physical proximity to managers and coworkers. Like most biases, proximity bias often happens unconsciously. But it is hurtful to remote employees and can be damaging to an organization's culture and reputation.

Because hybrid workplaces are highly susceptible to proximity bias, it's important to watch for warning signs. Such bias can be as subtle as remote employees missing out on office perks, being excluded from team lunches or not being able to effectively participate in meetings. Proximity bias can also appear in more obvious and extreme ways, such as the consistent promotion of on-site over remote employees and remote employees earning less than those who work in the office.

In an Office for National Statistics study, for example, employees who worked mostly from home between 2013 and 2020 were 38 percent less likely on average to receive a bonus compared to on-site employees.

What are the risks of proximity bias?

Without a hybrid work strategy that combats proximity bias, organizations can become vulnerable to a variety of risks and consequences. The most serious is that proximity bias can unintentionally create a "two-class system," in which on-site employees are viewed as better, more productive workers. A two-class system can trigger a plethora of negative cultural and operational outcomes, including:

- **Reduced employee engagement:** If remote employees don't feel part of the team or appreciated for their hard work, they won't stay engaged. According to a Harvard Business Review survey, remote employees are more likely to report feeling left out or mistreated by their on-site counterparts.

- **Decreased collaboration:** Effective hybrid collaboration requires intentional planning. The more difficult it is for remote employees to contribute and share ideas, the easier it is to cut them out of conversations completely. The adage "out of sight, out of mind" is very relevant here.

- **Slower time to market:** Less cross-functional collaboration between remote and on-site teams can result in slower decision making, delays in new product launches and an overall lack of innovation within the organization.

- **Higher employee turnover rates:** With more organizations adopting flexible work models, employees have more control over where, when and how they work. If proximity bias is happening at your organization, remote employees won't wait for it to be resolved -- they'll simply find a new job that offers flexible working in a more inclusive environment. In fact, one in four employees plan to look for a new job after the pandemic.

Five ways to prevent proximity bias and foster an inclusive hybrid workplace

Fortunately, there are tactics and technologies that organizations can adopt to prepare for hybrid work and prevent proximity bias before it becomes a problem. Consider these top five tips.

1 Ensure all employees have an equal presence in hybrid meetings.

No matter where employees are located, hybrid meetings should feel as if everyone is in the same room and is an equal participant.

Meeting platform providers like Cisco and Microsoft have added several new features to accommodate meetings with a blend of remote and on-site workers. Earlier this year, for example, Cisco Webex launched a new capability called "People Focus," which uses machine learning and AI technology to individually re-frame in-person meeting participants who are spread across a meeting room. This gives every participant equal space on screen and provides remote employees with a better view to track who is speaking.
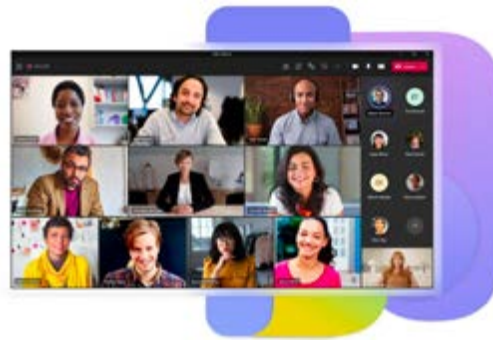

Microsoft Teams' Dynamic View arranges participants and meeting elements for optimal viewing.

Similarly, Microsoft Teams recently added intelligent cameras to their platform to enable AI-powered active speaker tracking and people recognition. Pairing these intelligent cameras with Teams' Dynamic View feature gives remote participants an enhanced view of the on-site meeting room and content, so they feel like they are physically in the same room.

Another option is to require all participants to join meetings virtually if there is at least one remote participant. Like during the pandemic, this puts everyone on an equal playing field -- a.k.a. a two-inch box on screen -- so no one feels unheard or unseen during a meeting.

2 Use multiple channels for engaging meeting participants.

In addition to giving all meeting participants equal space on screen, remote employees must also be able to contribute as if they were sitting side by side with their on-site counterparts. Leveraging videoconferencing features like hand raise icons, chat and polling can allow remote employees to add value to the conversation without speaking over someone else or disrupting the meeting flow. This is especially important considering more than one-third of employees who want to remain remote after the pandemic consider themselves introverted and may not be the loudest or most outgoing person in the meeting.
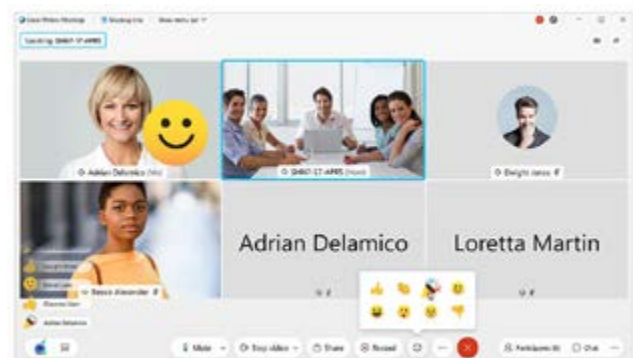
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3 **Recreate in-person collaboration in a virtual environment.**

Remember the days of attending big, in-person brainstorming meetings? Employees would pile into a conference room, cover the walls in sticky notes and jot down ideas on white boards. These meetings were invaluable for idea sharing and solving complex problems. So, how can organizations continue fostering the same kind of collaboration without excluding remote workers?

Cisco Webex Board Pro allows hybrid teams to brainstorm, draw, use stickies and annotate on any content or an infinite canvas.

By leveraging technologies like the Cisco Webex Board and its digital whiteboarding capabilities, on-site and remote employees can collaborate together in real time. As on-site employees write notes on the whiteboard, remote employees will see them appear on their screens (and vice versa). This allows teams to mimic the brainstorming sessions they used to hold in person, virtually.

For less formal collaboration, consider creating a dedicated Microsoft Teams channel or Webex Teams space for random brainstorming, "water cooler" chats, team building exercises, sharing photos and other ad-hoc conversations that remote employees might normally miss out on. Additionally, Google Workspace and Microsoft 365 are good options for hybrid teams to edit and collaborate simultaneously in real time.

4 **Adjust for differing time zones and languages.**

During the pandemic, many employees took advantage of the flexibility of remote work and relocated to new cities, states and even countries. According to Zillow, roughly one in 10 Americans moved in the past year to be closer to family, live in a more affordable area or simply experience a place they've always wanted to visit.

When offices reopen, organizations must consider their various employee personas, where they're located and the differing time zones to maintain high-performance teams. It may not always be possible to schedule meetings when everyone can join so it's important to have other channels available. Real-time collaboration platforms, for example, allow employees to share their thoughts around a project during their individual work hours and remain available for coworkers to view and respond to later. Voice messages are also becoming an increasingly popular way for employees to provide feedback without sending the wrong tone -- a common issue in email and other written communication.

With the ability to work from anywhere, organizations can expand their talent pools and hire top talent across the globe. While this allows for a diversified workforce, it can also create communication barriers for employees who speak a different language than the rest of the team or who are deaf or hard of hearing. To ensure these employees feel included in meetings, leading videoconferencing platforms, like Cisco Webex, Microsoft Teams and Zoom, have added real-time transcription and translation so everyone can follow along.
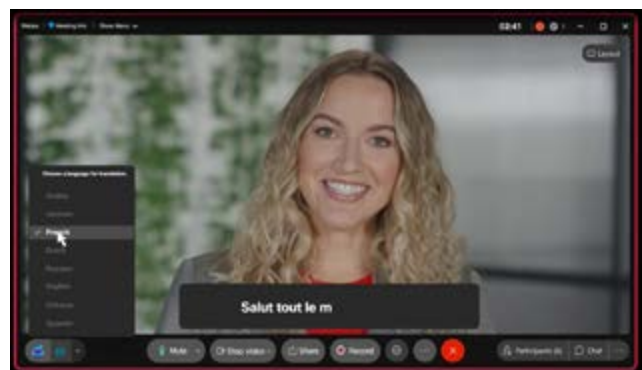
Cisco Webex's real-time translation feature lets users choose closed captioning translation from English to more than 100 different languages.

5 **Think outside the physical building for company events.**

Holiday parties, happy hours, teambuilding outings, new employee onboarding. Traditionally, these events were hosted in person, and remote employees were either excluded or provided a sub-par experience. Moving forward, events must adapt to deliver a hybrid-first experience.

When planning a large-scale event, organizations must ask themselves: How will events be delivered to remote participants? Do we have live streaming capabilities and support? Can our network handle an influx of employees logging into an event all at once? How is our audio and video quality?

For smaller events within individual teams, managers must consider how they will recreate the on-site experience for remote employees and encourage participation. Using breakout sessions during a virtual teambuilding event, for example, can make it easier for remote employees to participate due to the smaller group size.

Lastly, virtualizing the onboarding process can help new remote employees feel welcomed and connected to the workplace. Virtual office tours allow employees to experience a 360-degree view of offices while reinforcing company culture. Additionally, emerging metaverse-style platforms, like Gather and WWT's custom virtual workplace software Nipper, combine the virtual and physical components of the office to mimic real life.

WWT Tours is a virtual tour of our global headquarters in St. Louis. New remote employees can navigate throughout the building, learn about WWT's company culture and answer questions to feel connected to the physical office.

Start tackling proximity bias today

In a successful hybrid work model, employees shouldn't have to choose between remote work or career progression. Both are possible if the right tools and processes are in place to prevent proximity bias and ensure inclusion. But achieving this overall vision and culture of inclusivity can be challenging. It requires a holistic digital workspace strategy and deep understanding of both remote and on-site employees' needs.

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