

Is proximity bias undermining hybrid teams?

There is much to be admired about the new world of work. Not least the opportunity to make geography history in the sea change around where workers work. But, they say, the battle between good and evil runs through us all! Now, the new bad that has emerged in the hybrid world is proximity bias.

Temps de lecture : minute

18 January 2023

Proximity bias is modern management speak for favouring people who physically work beside you and overlooking those who are elsewhere. It is an issue which is currently creating much angst. In those hazy, crazy days before COVID, it showed itself when people in City head offices got preferential treatment to those working in regional centres out of town. It disadvantaged part-time workers, those on maternity leave and, often, female colleagues who had supposedly equality friendly and flexible working arrangements. Now, it threatens to discriminate against much larger groups of hybrid workers. It widens inequality and dilutes diversity. So, it's a major equity issue too.

Think of proximity bias as simply “out of sight is out of mind” and here are some common examples:

- A team leader has a great opportunity to delegate a career enhancing project to one of their team members. They are at the coffee machine and talk it over with a young colleague. By the time the kettle has boiled the decision is made and the work allocated. But is that colleague the best qualified, most suitable person to take this on? Is it fair?

- There is a crisis, and something needs to be fixed right now. The manager surveys the scene outside their office and summons the best people from the office floor. Brains are stormed. Tasks are allocated. Solutions agreed. Those not there are not involved.
- A senior manager is interviewing for an important, attractive new role. On the interview panel they are drawn towards a colleague who works in the office most days. They know their work first hand; they chat at lunchtime; they like the cut of their jib. Does that person get the job or a remote worker who the boss doesn't really know? The human brain is programmed to favour the familiar over the unfamiliar. That means you choose the devil you know, rather than the devil you don't know. But is that the best appointment for the company?

What can be done to prevent proximity bias?

Firstly, managers need to adopt the Green Cross Code of the hybrid workspace – stop, look and listen. Stop making decisions on the hoof. The world has changed. We live in a more complex hybrid world of work. Leaders need to adopt a different mindset. They need to get out and meet the hybrid workforce where they are. There are several other tactics that need to become given habits of management.

In remote meetings those dialling in need to be included and not left to feel like they are looking in through a steamed-up window. In a workplace which considers this carefully, everyone joins the meeting virtually even if they are in the office. Then, everyone is equal.

Managers and team leaders need to change the way they share information. Everything which is shared within the office needs to be shared remotely too. The technology exists to make this happen. Managers need to ensure that they use the tech fairly and habitually. When considering people for promotions, projects and development opportunities they need to create processes and triggers which ensure

they think far and wide when allocating these fairly. Don't just look in front of your nose. Recognise the existence of this bias. Then deal with it.

A highly negative trait in the hybrid world of work, proximity bias not only widens inequality but also hammers employee engagement and lowers productivity. Leaders are waking up to how we now live in a very different world of work. It's a lot more complex. It requires a different mindset to engage your employees. We can't afford to disengage individuals and teams through proximity bias. In this current talent war, leaders who don't address this issue will see people leave and profits drop. They will not maximise the potential of their teams. To make hybrid working effective we need to banish proximity bias before it causes any more damage. It's time to sort the new bad.

Jeremy Campbell is the CEO of performance improvement and technology business, *Black Isle Group*.

Article by Jeremy Campbell