GLOSSARY

What is proximity bias?

Here's how to combat proximity bias, a cognitive glitch that has serious implications for workforce equity, company productivity, and employee attrition

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After more than two years of pandemic-related upheaval, many companies have finally settled on long-term policies dictating when, where, and how their employees are expected to show up to work.

As of June 2022, 49% of global knowledge workers were working in a hybrid arrangement, spending some of their time in the office and some of their time remote; 34% were full-time in the office; and 18% were full-time remote.

The fact that three out of every five global knowledge workers now have at least some flexibility to decide when and where they work is ultimately a very good thing; knowledge workers with flexibility consistently report less stress and

anxiety, better work-life balance, and greater satisfaction with their jobs than fully in-office workers.

But in offering employees more flexibility, leaders need to beware a major pitfall: in a 2021 Gartner survey, 64% of managers said they believed that office workers outperform remote workers—and that those office workers should be first in line for the next raise.

Those managers were expressing what experts call **proximity bias**, showing a preference for employees who they spend more time around. It's a cognitive glitch that has serious implications for workforce equity, company productivity, and employee attrition.

As more and more workers demand flexibility, how can executives make sure all employees are treated fairly, regardless of working location?

Proximity bias, defined

An unconscious tendency to favor the people we're physically closer to. In flexible working environments, proximity bias heightens the risk that in-office workers will receive preferential treatment simply by spending more in-person time with their managers.

What is proximity bias?

Psychologists coined the term "proximity bias" in the 1970s to describe an unconscious tendency to form more positive perceptions of people we're physically closer to. On hybrid teams, proximity bias causes managers to value employees who show up in the office more highly than remote workers—even

though reams of research show that remote workers are typically more productive than their in-person counterparts.

Left unchecked, proximity bias can steer managers into promoting less effective employees and shortchange those who don't put in the same amount of facetime. And because white men are both disproportionately likely to be in leadership positions and to want to work from the office compared to people of color and women, proximity bias runs the risk of hampering companies' progress on DEI goals and perpetuating racial and gender inequities.

Examples of proximity bias

The early research on proximity bias established links between physical proximity, familiarity, and positive sentiment. A 1974 study showed that police academy recruits formed stronger bonds with classmates whose last names were closer to theirs in the alphabet, since seating charts arranged students alphabetically by last name. (Other work has expanded the concept of proximity beyond physical distance. World Cup ski jumping judges tend to give higher scores to jumpers who share their cultural background—what the researchers called "cultural proximity bias.")

"There's lots of research showing that just being around somebody a lot makes you more familiar with that person, and that—unless there's something really offensive about them—familiarity leads to an increase in liking," says Dr. Kimberly Elsbach, an organizational psychologist and emeritus professor at the UC Davis Graduate School of Management.

In our personal lives, proximity bias serves as a kind of mental shortcut that shapes our relationships with our friends and family. In the corporate world, Elsbach says, proximity bias pushes companies toward a culture in which employees who spend more time in the office are first in line for the choicest assignments, promotions, and raises—regardless of their actual work output compared to their out-of-office colleagues. For example, a 2015 study from the Stanford Graduate School of Business found that remote workers at a travel agency were less likely to earn promotions than their in-office counterparts, even though the remote workers were 13% more productive.

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Elsbach's research explores how an employee's career prospects hinge less on their output and more on the amount of facetime they can put in with their colleagues and bosses. In a study published in 2010, Elsbach asked 60 corporate office workers to read a short description of a hypothetical colleague who is always at their desk, both during and outside of normal work hours. She then gave participants a list of 15 words and asked them to circle which words had appeared in the description they'd read. Participants frequently circled "dependable," "responsible," "committed," and "dedicated"—even though those words hadn't actually appeared in the written descriptions.

"This is called a 'misidentification task,'" Elsbach explains. "When you misidentify words in the description that weren't actually there, it's a sign that you have unconsciously or spontaneously attributed those traits to the person. We found strong support for our hypothesis that if you are seen in the office more often— just *seen*, as in the person perceiving you has no information about your performance and doesn't know what you're actually doing—you could be playing video solitaire, for all they know—but if you're just visible at work, you were rated much higher for attributes like 'committed,' 'reliable,' 'dependable,' and 'dedicated.'"

These traits, Elsbach points out, are commonly found on performance appraisals. So the facetime bias "could actually make a difference in things like promotions. But it has nothing to do with your actual output. And managers don't even know they're doing it. That's why we call it a bias."

In a later study of employee evaluation methods at the UC Davis Medical School, Elsbach observed this dynamic in the wild: Though department policies

encouraged working remotely and taking leaves of absence, leaders acknowledged taking facetime into account when evaluating their employees.

Who's most affected by proximity bias?

Our Summer 2022 Pulse data shows that Asian/Asian American, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx knowledge workers prioritize flexible work at higher rates than their white counterparts. Working mothers are also likelier to want flexibility than working fathers, according to the data.

Desire for flexibility remains strongest among underrepresented groups.

Percentage of US survey respondents who prefer a hybrid or fully remote work arrangement, by race/ethnicity

88%	83%	81%	79%
Asian/ Asian American	Black	Hispanic/ Latinx	White
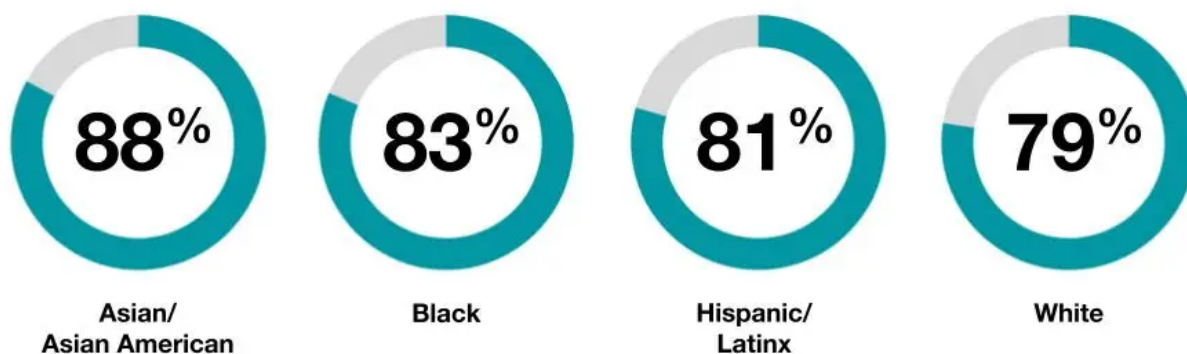
Source: Future Forum Pulse, Wave 7, conducted May 2–16, 2022. Number of completed responses (US) = 5,448.

This makes sense. When people of color can work from home, there's less of a need to "code switch," or modulate their behavior, appearance, or speech to fit into the dominant culture. And flexible work allows employees with caretaking responsibilities to coordinate their professional responsibilities around their obligations to their children or elders.

So it's not terribly surprising that white and male workers—who have historically dominated the corporate world—are much more likely to prefer a traditional office environment. Back in February 2022, white employees were already 17% likelier to be back in the office full-time.

Since white and male employees are both disproportionately likely to be in management roles and to want to work in the office full-time, "proximity bias inflicts the greatest damage on women and people of color," said Katica Roy, CEO of Pipeline, a platform that equips HR teams with data and insights on their workforce's gender inequities. "Companies that offer hybrid work arrangements need systems to neutralize bias between in-office and remote workers so they don't further entrench intersectional gender inequity gaps."

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Fortunately, researchers and experts consistently agree on a suite of changes companies can make that ensure they're treating remote workers fairly.

Strategies to overcome proximity bias

✅ **Flexibility with guardrails**: Knowledge workers overwhelmingly want flexibility, but most also recognize the benefits of guardrails. An environment where employees have absolute freedom to come into the office whenever they want is primed for proximity bias, since some employees will want or be able to show up more often than others.

"I think the hybrid workplace is the most at risk for inequities creeping back in," says Ella Washington, professor of practice at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business and the founder of Ellavate Solutions, which provides diversity and inclusion strategy and training for organizations.

Companies such as GitHub and Automattic have countered proximity bias by ditching the office altogether and requiring everyone to work from home all of the time. At Slack, the leadership team instituted what they called "executive

speed limits," a commitment to modeling flexibility by agreeing to spend no more than three days a week in the office.

"Our CEO, Stewart Butterfield, challenged all of his direct reports to set an example by limiting our time in the office, and by focusing that in-office time on team events and customer interactions—in other words, on the activities that really benefit from being in person," says Slack Chief of Staff Robby Kwok. "This was a deliberate effort to counter proximity bias; we knew that no matter what our official policy stated, if employees saw executives in the office regularly, they would believe they needed to do the same if they wanted to advance."

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- ✅ **Build digital-first systems:** Flexible teams must invest in technology and systems that make the arrangement as equitable as possible. That could mean that if one member calls into a meeting on Zoom, everyone else brings their laptops to the meeting room and logs on to Zoom as well.

"High-tech audio and video screens can offset subpar webcams and sound," said Scott Hitchins, chief marketing officer at Interact Software in an interview with Reworked.co.

If meetings are only optimized for workers in the office, or important decisions happen in casual, fly-by conversation, employees who don't or can't come into the office are at a serious disadvantage.

Combatting proximity bias is one more reason to hone your company's commitment to asynchronous communication: opt for memos over meetings, longer and more composed updates over busy back-and-forths, and brainwriting over brainstorming. And documenting progress and blockers on a

board like Basecamp, Asana, or Jira steers teams away from the need to keep up with fast-moving conversations over email or instant messaging while making information equally available to all employees.

✅ **Measure results, not inputs:** Research from Elsbach and others shows how proximity bias causes remote workers to miss out on networking opportunities, ambitious assignments, promotions, and raises—and that too many leaders still rely on subjective, trait-based performance indicators to guide these important decisions, rather than on objective, performance-based metrics.

"You should treat performance evaluations and promotions like you treat your sales KPIs," Roy says. "Make them objective and transparent. Sales reps know their numbers. They know what they need to succeed. Their conversion rates are based on objective data, not subjective feelings." For evidence on how objective metrics can counter biases and improve equity, Roy pointed to Scotiabank, which saw the number of women in senior management rise from 18.9% to 31% four years after it adopted a transparent career advancement process.

✅ **Base promotions on weekly goals instead of annual reviews:** Gleb Tsipursky, head of the future-of work-consultancy Disaster Avoidance Experts, coaches his hybrid and remote corporate clients to do away with annual performance reviews, and instead to adopt weekly or bi-monthly check-ins with each employee. These check-ins should be structured around interim goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound—or SMART.

"A goal for a week might be to create a piece of marketing and send it for approval. Did you get that done or not?" Tsipursky said. When it's time to make decisions on promotions or raises, both managers and their employees have a collaborative record of how many goals the employee met, so nobody's surprised. Regular check-ins also ensure remote team members get more one-on-one time with their managers, so workers on distributed teams are less likely to remain out of sight, out of mind.

Right now, proximity bias threatens to undercut progress on diversity, equity, and inclusion for remote workers. But there's some hopeful news, too. Over the past

year, executive respondents in our quarterly Pulse survey have consistently rated proximity bias among their top concerns with the shift to hybrid work.

It won't happen automatically, but with commitment and attention, executives can help make sure that the mass transition to flexible work is an opportunity to build a more equal, healthier, and more efficient future for tens of millions of workers worldwide.

Proximity bias resources

- ✅ *How the Future Works: Leading Flexible Teams to do the Best Work of Their Lives* — a new book from the leaders of Future Forum and Slack

- ✅ Moving from retrofit to redesign on diversity, equity, and inclusion: a how-to guide for leaders

- ✅ Beyond hybrid: create shared guardrails to keep flexible work transformations on track

- ✅ What are team-level agreements?

- ✅ Fortune: How leaders can solve the 'facetime' problem in an era of hybrid and remote work

- ✅ Forbes: Alternatives To Relying On Attendance To Evaluate Productivity

- ✅ Why flexible work is essential for your DEI strategy

- ✅ Preventing Proximity Bias In Hybrid Work Is Key To Closing Equity Gaps
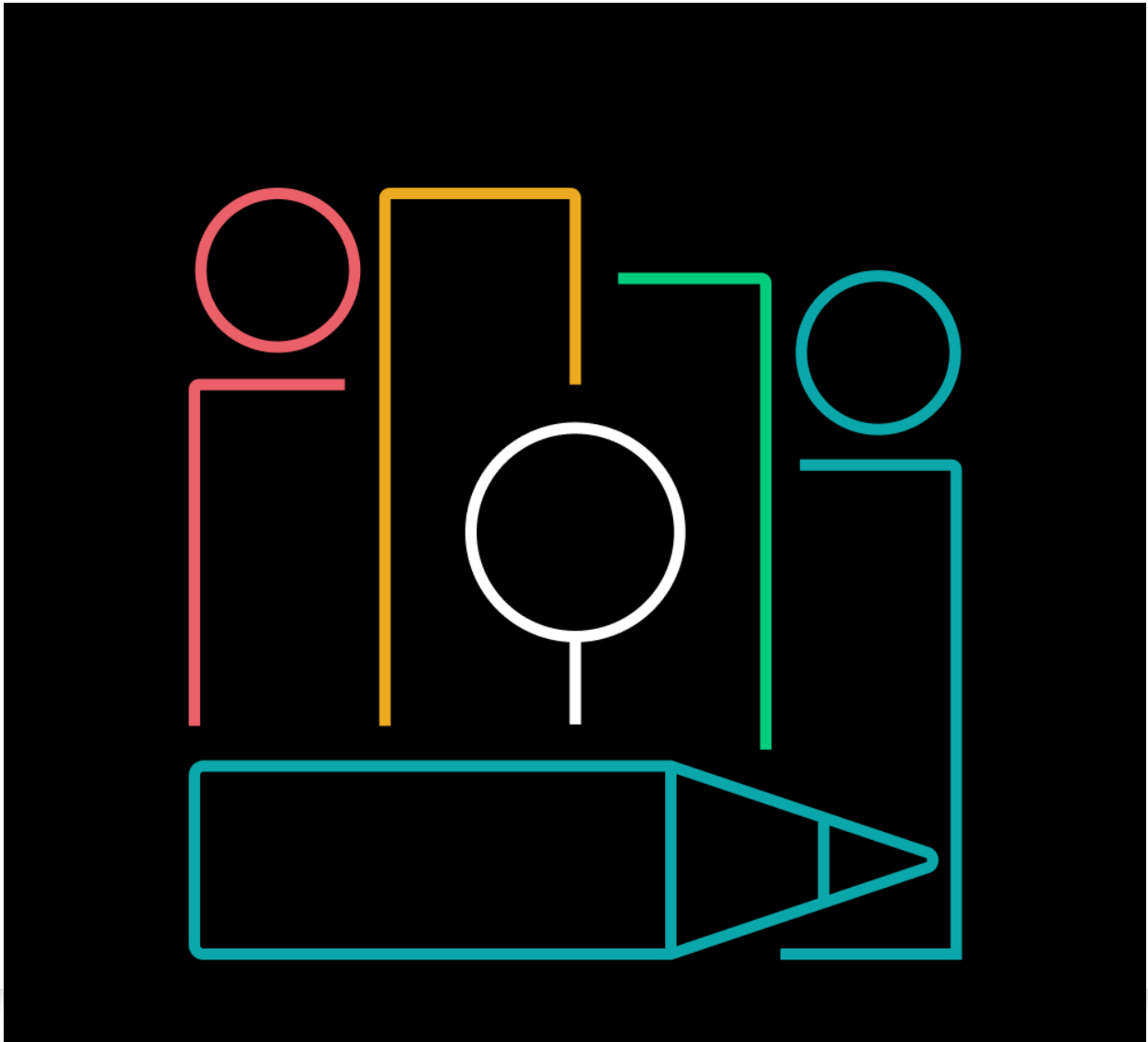
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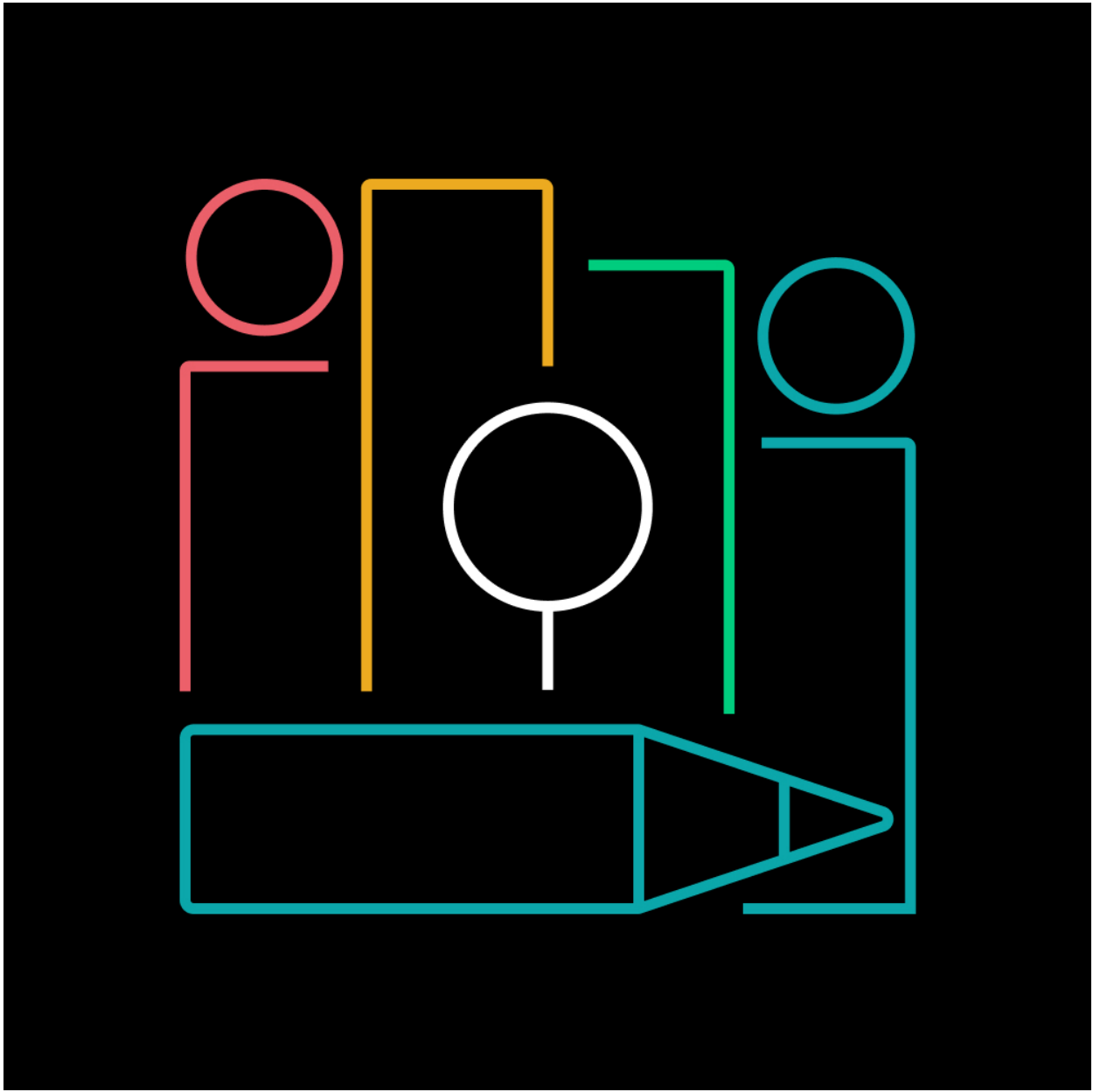
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