LSE | The Inclusion Initiative

Hybrid Working:
A Dictionary of Behavioral Biases

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Foreword

The world of work is changing. Once the COVID-19 pandemic ends it is expected that work will return to a "new" normal.

This "new" normal is expected to leverage some of the positive changes to work that were enlisted to allow workers to continue to work safely during the pandemic. For professional workers, one such change is a move towards hybrid working. Here, within firms some workers will work on site and others will work from home. For some firms this will mean sequential attendance of employees on-site. For others it will be

decided who works on-site fulltime depending on their job. Either way, a move towards hybrid working, where some employees communicate face to face and others online poses challenges for inclusivity.

Specific to inclusion, there is a dearth of literature in behavioral science, or indeed in the broader social sciences that provides robust evidence of problems to inclusivity that

will arise in a hybrid work setting. To consider this is interesting. Do I act differently if I attend a meeting from home versus being with my colleagues in the office? Will my psychological attachment to my employer change if I spend the majority of my working week working from home? Will I be more likely to include co-workers in my ideas if they have the same work location as I do? Any such changes to behavior have a clear line to high stakes outcomes like promotions, pay levels and access to stretch assignments.

Yet we are only beginning to think about behavioral responses to hybrid working, and to date there has been no discussion as to what behavioral biases are most likely to impact hybrid working. At the LSE I am the director of the MSc in Behavioral Science and I have been humbled at the level of interest our students have shown in The Inclusion Initiative. In this dictionary you will find a description of behavioral biases, and an example of how they may arise in hybrid working, as conceived by BE-Inclusive, a talented group of our MSc students. The documentation of this dictionary is important to me for two reasons. First, as an academic it gives me ideas of the types of biases, I may expect to find in hybrid teams. This allows me think about experimental approaches that would allow exploration of whether these biases do indeed manifest themselves, and, if they do, interventions that may circumvent negative ramifications. Second, I hope this dictionary of behavioral biases in hybrid working settings brings discussion into firms who are currently re-organising work. As the director of The Inclusion Initiative I am very interested in hearing from firms who are having these discussions, and in particular to learn of any safeguards to the biases raised in this document that are already being put in place. Overall, I view this dictionary as an excellent step in opening such conversations, and I hope it inspires some readers to monitor the issues that we raise so that hybrid working does not have winners and losers, but rather makes possible the equalisation of opportunities.

Grace Lordan

Dr Grace Lordan, Founding Director of The Inclusion Initiative at the LSE

Action Bias:

Occurs when people favor action over inaction, even if this will not necessarily lead to the best outcome.

When in-office workers are informally discussing a topic that requires a decision to be made and the most dominant person in the team has action bias, remote workers are likely to be excluded from the decision-making process. This arises because the administrative burden of including them is perceived to be too high (ie, setting up a meeting, booking a room, and a zoom call etc.) due to the reasoning that it implies a delay to action.

Attention Bias:

The tendency to focus on some elements of a problem more than others.

The COVID-19 pandemic can cause heightened attention to be paid to health and virus-related stimuli, increasing anxiety and hypervigilance for health-related information. Employees can become overloaded with COVID-19 cues both at home and in the office. Given humans have a limited capacity for attention, this can lead to an over-focus on pandemic-related outcomes at the detriment of other outcomes.

Availability Heuristic:

Judgements are influenced by information that is salient and readily accessible.

In a hybrid working environment, management may give preferential treatment to those who are in the office on a regular basis as their work is more visible, and thereby more salient. This can cause preferential allocation of stretch assignments, pay, and promotions to in-office workers.

Bike Shedding Effect:

The time a group spends discussing any issue will be inverse to the consequentiality of that issue.

This effect might be particularly strong in a hybrid working environment if remote workers are not regularly updated on major new projects. Remote workers might then be more hesitant to contribute in meetings, if they hold an unfounded belief that someone else has already considered their potential suggestions.

Can't be Bothered Effect:

A tendency not to participate in discussions even when you have valuable insights to add.

Employees working remotely who feel that at-home working is a disadvantage may become disengaged. Symptoms of the Can't be Bothered Effect include turning cameras off during video-conferencing meetings and remaining silent during discussions.

Commitment Bias:

The tendency to be consistent with what we've already done or said we will do, particularly if this is public knowledge.

Those in the office who have a hybrid meeting scheduled with some online colleagues are likely to discuss the topics of the meeting informally with other colleagues who are also in the office before the meeting starts. This might lead to employees entering hybrid meetings with already formed opinions about a meeting agenda, creating an illusion of certainty and group cohesiveness, making them less likely to accept dissenting or opposing opinions to their already formed judgments.

Extreme Response Bias:

A tendency to take extreme positions on topics even though you do not actually have an extreme view.

Employees working remotely who fear being overlooked for opportunities or promotions may adopt extreme positions during meetings simply to get noticed.

Fallacy of Frequency:

The tendency to see regular patterns where none exist.

As workers are divided into groups that work primarily from home or in the office, this may cause anecdotal evaluations in the differences between these employees. This can be a problem if factitious comparisons are spread and stereotypes are formed about people based on whether they work from home or in the office, rather than their talent or productivity.

Fundamental Attribution Error:

The tendency for people to over-emphasise personality-based explanations for their co-workers' behaviour, while over-emphasising situational explanations for their own.

For example, needing time off to avoid burn-out is viewed as a serious challenge when experienced by oneself or a good colleague, but is met with much less sympathy if requested by an unfamiliar colleague.

Gaming Effect:

Occurs when people who predominantly work from home become disassociated with the reality, importance, and impact of their work.

The experience of home working resembles "playing a computer game", leading to increased detachment. This effect is likely most relevant for new hires, particularly those in their first job who have only experienced work as a remote activity.

Grass is Greener:

The tendency to feel that other people are always in a better position than oneself.

In a hybrid work environment, remote team-members may believe that on-site colleagues have greater advantages, due to the physical proximity to colleagues and decision-makers. In contrast, those in the office may simultaneously believe that remote workers have a better work-life balance and more flexibility in their daily schedule. This dynamic could heighten in-group/out-group challenges and decrease collaboration.

Group Polarisation Effect:

Group polarisation arises when members of a deliberating group move towards a more extreme point in whatever direction is indicated by the members' pre-deliberation tendency.

The group polarisation effect, if unchecked may lead to differences in post COVID-19 workplace policies across firms, given that in the end policies are written by groups within firms. For example, in firms where the majority of decision makers do not have caring responsibilities, there may be a greater push to return to the office.

Heightened Spotlight Effect:

Occurs when we believe people are paying more attention to our actions than they actually are, in other words our tendency to always feel like we are "in the spotlight".

In a hybrid work setting those who feel relatively less job security may experience the heightened spotlight effect, and feel a need to participate more often in discussions, even when they have no new novel insights to offer. This may manifest as excessive emailing or lengthy meetings as the affected individual attempts to prove their worth.

Halo Effect:

The tendency for an impression created in one area to influence opinions in an unrelated area.

For example, people with attractive Zoom backgrounds, such as those that showcase a stylish and tidy space, may be erroneously assumed to be more competent or capable than those with less appealing Zoom backgrounds.

In-Group/Out-Group Effects:

Pattern of favoring members of one's in-group over out-group members.

An in-group/out-group division may appear when there is a delineation between who works at home and who comes into the office. This arises given the human tendency to identify better with others in the same situation we find ourselves in. This division may impact collaboration between the two groups to the detriment of the firm.

Loss Aversion:

As losses loom larger than gains, employees may over-focus on what they have lost, not what they have gained.

Hybrid working environments make casual interactions more difficult. Team-members are no longer easily able to discuss stressful work-related experiences in person. Similarly, they are unable to celebrate workplace victories together as an entire group. These lost experiences impact wellbeing, particularly when they are not likely to be recovered in the foreseeable future, far larger than comparable gains related to an individual's new mode of working.

Mere Exposure Effect:

The tendency to develop a preference for things because they are familiar.

Decision-makers planning hybrid working environments will be slower in evaluating all courses of action when developing functional hybrid working environments, given past exposure to exclusive in-office or working-from-home practices. Organisations might also be reluctant to experiment with new hybrid working practices as it deviates from the way things have been done in the past.

Newbie Effect:

Refers to the unique behavioural experiences of first-time workers and new employees, who have not formerly experienced pre-COVID-19 workplace interactions at their organisations.

First-time workers may have a more difficult time assessing the workplace culture and forming career building relationships with co-workers when they are on-boarded virtually.

Nostalgia Effect:

Feelings regarding past experiences, or a desire to return to an earlier time in one's life can impact present and future decisions.

Missing the daily pleasures of the pre-COVID-19 workplace — sitting next to coworkers, grabbing and eating lunch together, attending conferences, and sharing common physical products — all of which cannot be replicated fully online can reduce feelings of belonging, and in turn contribute to employee dissatisfaction.

Proactivity Bias:

The more proactive you are, the more action will take place around you.

In a hybrid working environment those that go the extra mile to reach out, ask questions, be involved and speak up will likely benefit from proactivity bias.

Psychological Distance Effect:

A cognitive separation between the self and the workplace that leads to employees developing a low sense of belonging to their companies or organisations.

Physical distance is correlated with psychological distance, implying that those working at home more regularly may experience lower levels of attachment to their firm and its goals as compared to in-office employees. Firms can abate the psychological distance effect by taking steps to ensure the inclusion of at home workers.

Selection Bias:

Occurs when people self-select into options depending on their characteristics.

In hybrid working arrangements, employees will likely choose their working environment based on personal preferences and constraints. For example, people with caring duties are more likely to select into regular home-working as compared to others. Consequently, the characteristics of groups working in the office as compared to those at home will differ.

Status-Quo Bias:

A tendency to continue with the current state of affairs even when it is sub-optimal.

Managers may continue inferior working practices even though they are no longer as effective in hybrid working environments. For example, maintaining presenteeism as a proxy of productivity. Status quo bias may also cause employees to remain in jobs that have evolved and are no longer suited to them.

Zoom Effect:

Occurs when people make fewer contributions when a meeting is virtual, but are less likely to simply cascade information and more likely to contribute unique information.

In a hybrid work setting, the Zoom Effect may reduce the prevalence of groupthink, increasing the sharing of unique information. However, the Zoom effect might also lead to more frictions during discussions, implying it is harder to reach a consensus.

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