

[BIAS INTERRUPTERS] *small steps big change*

INTERRUPTING BIAS IN ASSIGNMENTS

Tools for Organizations

THE CHALLENGE

Every workplace has high-profile assignments that are career-enhancing (“glamour work”) and low-profile assignments that are beneficial to the organization but not the individual’s career. Research shows that women do more “office housework”¹ than men.² This includes literal housework (ordering lunch), administrative work (scheduling a time to meet), and emotion work (“she’s upset; comfort her”). Misallocation of the glamour work and the office housework is a key reason why leadership across most industries is still male-dominated. Professionals of color (both men and women) also report less access to desirable assignments than white men do:³

- **Glamour work.** More than 80% of white men, but only 53% of women of color, 59% of white women, and 63% of men of color, reported the same access to desirable assignments as their colleagues.⁴
- **Office housework.** Almost 50% of white women and 43% of women of color reported that at work they more often play administrative roles such as taking notes for a meeting compared to their colleagues. Only 26% of white men and 20% of men of color reported this.⁵

Diversity at the top can only occur when diverse employees at all levels of the organization have access to assignments that let them take risks and develop new skills. If the glamour work and the office housework aren’t distributed evenly, you won’t be tapping into the full potential of your workforce. Most workplaces that use an informal “hey, you!” assignment system end up distributing assignments based on factors other than experience and talent. If women and people of color keep getting stuck with the same low-profile assignments, they will be more likely to be dissatisfied and to search for opportunities elsewhere.⁶

THE SOLUTION

Fair allocation of the glamour work and the office housework are two separate problems. Some organizations will want to solve the office housework problem before tackling the glamour work; others will want to address both problems simultaneously.

1. Identify and Track

The first step is to find out if, and where, you have a problem. Find out:

What is the office housework and glamour work in your organization?

Who is doing what and for how long?

Are there demographic patterns that indicate gender and/or racial bias at play?

¹ Williams & Dempsey, 2014

² Misra, Lundquist & Templer, 2012; Mitchell & Hesli, 2013; Porter, 2007; Benschop & Dooreward 1998; Ohlott, Ruderman & McCauley, 1994; De Pater, Van Vianen, & Bechtoldt 2010

³ ABA Commission on Women, forthcoming 2017

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ Babcock, Recalde, Vesterlund, & Weingart, 2017



[BIAS INTERRUPTERS] *small steps big change*

To do this:

1. Distribute the [office housework survey](#) (Document 2) to your employees to find out who is doing the office housework and how much of their time it takes up.
2. Convene relevant managers (and anyone else who distributes assignments) to identify what is the glamour work and what is the lower-profile work in your organization. Use our [Assignment Typology Worksheet](#) (Document 4) to create a typology for assignments, and our [protocol](#) (Document 3) for more details.
3. Input the information from the typology meeting into the [Manager Assignment Worksheet](#) (Document 5) and distribute to managers. Have managers fill out the worksheet and submit them, identifying who they assign the glamour work and lower-profile work to. See our [protocol](#) (Document 3) for more details.

2. Analyze metrics

Analyze survey results and Manager Assignment Worksheet information for demographic patterns, dividing employees into (i) majority men, majority women, men of color, and women of color, (ii) parents who have just returned from parental leave, (iii) professionals working part time or flexible schedules, and (iv) any other underrepresented group that your organization tracks (veterans, LGBTQ people, individuals with disabilities, etc.) Identify:

- Who is doing the office housework?
- Who is doing the glamour work?
- Who is doing the low-profile work?
- Create and analyze metrics by [individual supervisor](#).

3. Implement Bias Interrupters for Office Housework

- **Don't ask for volunteers.** Women are more likely to volunteer because they are under subtle but powerful pressures to do so.⁷
- **Hold everyone equally accountable.** "I give it to women because they do it well and the men don't," is a common sentiment. This dynamic reflects an environment in which men suffer few consequences for doing a poor job on office housework, but women who do a poor job are seen as "prima donnas" or "not team players." Hold men and women equally accountable for carrying out all assignments properly.
- **Use admins.** If possible, assign office housework tasks to admins, e.g. birthday parties, scheduling meetings, ordering lunch.
- **Establish a rotation.** A rotation is also helpful for many administrative tasks (e.g. taking notes, scheduling meetings.) Rotating housework tasks like ordering lunch and planning parties is also an option if admins are unavailable.
- **Shadowing.** Another option for administrative tasks is to assign a more junior person to shadow someone more senior—and take notes.

⁷ Heilman & Chen, 2005; Allen, 2006; Babcock, Recalde, Vesterlund, Weingart, 2017; Williams & Dempsey, 2014.



[BIAS INTERRUPTERS] *small steps big change*

4. Implement Bias Interrupters for Glamour Work

- **Avoid mixed messages.** If your organization values such things as mentoring and committee work (like serving on the Diversity Initiative), make sure these things are valued when the time comes for promotions and raises. Sometimes organizations say they highly value this kind of work—but they don't. Mixed messages of this kind will negatively affect women and people of color.
- **Conduct a roll-out meeting.** Gather relevant managers and supervisors to introduce the bias interrupters initiative and set expectations. Use our [key talking points](#) (Document 6) for the roll-out meeting.
- **Provide a bounceback.** Identify individual supervisors whose glamour work allocation is lop-sided. Hold a meeting with that supervisor and bring the problem to their attention. Help them think through why they only assign glamour work to certain people or certain types of people. Work with them to figure out if either, 1) the available pool for glamour work assignments is diverse but is not being tapped fully or whether 2) only a few people have the requisite skills for glamour work assignments. Read our [Responses to Common Pushback](#) (Document 7) and [Identifying Bias in Assignments](#) (Document 8) worksheets before the bounceback meetings to prepare. You may have to address low-profile work explicitly at the same time as you address high-profile assignments; this will vary by organization.

If a diverse pool has the requisite skills...

- **Implement a rotation.** Have the supervisor set up a rotation to ensure fair access to plum assignments.
- **Formalize the pool.** Write down the list of people with the requisite skills and make it visible to the supervisor. Sometimes just being reminded of the pool can help.
- **Institute accountability.** Have the supervisor track their allocation of glamour work going forward to measure progress. Research shows that accountability matters.⁸

If the pool is not diverse...

- **Re-visit your assumption** that only one (or very few) employees can handle this assignment: is that true or is the supervisor in question just more comfortable working with those few people?
- **Analyze how the pool was assembled.** Does the supervisor allocate the glamour work by relying on self-promotion or volunteers? If so, that will often disadvantage women and people of color. Shift to more objective measures to create the pool based on skills and qualifications.

If #1 and #2 aren't relevant or don't solve your problem, then it's time to **expand the pool**:

- **Development plan.** Identify what skills or competencies an employee needs to be eligible for the high-profile assignments work and develop a plan to help the employee develop the requisite skills.
- **Leverage existing HR policies.** If your organization uses a competency-based system, or has a Talent Development Committee or equivalent, that's a resource to help develop competencies so that career-enhancing assignments can be allocated fairly more fairly.
- **Shadowing.** Have a more-junior person shadow a more-experienced person during the high-profile assignment.
- **Mentoring.** Establish a mentoring program to help a broader range of junior people gain access to valued skills.

⁸ Tetlock. 1983; Tetlock & Mitchell, 2009



[BIAS INTERRUPTERS] *small steps big change*

If you can't expand your pool, re-frame the assignment so that more people could participate in it. Could you break up the assignment into discrete pieces so more people get the experiences they need?

If nothing else works, consider a formal assignment system. Appoint an Assignments Czar to oversee the distribution of assignments in your organization. See what [other organizations have done](#) (Document 9).

5. Repeat as needed

- **Return to your metrics.** Did the bias interrupters produce change?
- **If you still don't have a fair allocation of high- and low-profile work,** you may need to implement stronger bias interrupters, or to consider moving to a formal assignment system. See what [other organizations have done](#) in this regard (Document 9).
- **Use an iterative process** until your metrics improve.