

[BIAS INTERRUPTERS] *meritocracy now!*

Tools for Assignments

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), emotion work (“she’s upset; comfort her”) and keeping-the-trains-running work. Too often inclusion work is treated as undervalued office housework. Among women at the manager level and above, Black women, LGBTQ+ women, and women with disabilities are up to twice as likely as women overall to spend a substantial amount of time promoting inclusion work.³ The common practice of assigning large loads of sponsorship to these groups further jeopardizes their advancement as they will have to *literally* work more hours than majority men if they want to get ahead.

In industry after industry, women and professionals of color report less access to desirable assignments than white men do.⁴ In our study of lawyers:⁵

- **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.
- **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.

Research also shows that LGBTQIA+ employees report less access to opportunities to take on a leadership role and to develop their skills, which in turn impacts their intent to stay at their jobs.⁶

Talent development at the top can only occur when 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. Managers that lead hybrid teams need to be particularly mindful to avoid on-site favoritism and to distribute career-enhancing assignments equally among their on-site and remote workers. If women, caregivers, and people of color are more likely to prefer remote work⁷ and to be overlooked for glamour work, they likely grow dissatisfied and search for opportunities elsewhere.⁸

To learn more about how assignments may be holding back your star players, read our [Harvard Business Review](#) article.

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*

COLLECTING DATA

Tracking the allocation of opportunities in your organization is a four-step process:

1. Survey the pilot group to find out who is doing the “non-promotable” work like planning parties and taking notes at a meeting. See **Work Allocation Pulse Survey**.

2. Assignment typology. Develop a typology identifying the high- and low-profile opportunities at your company (or the pilot group). See the **Assignment Typology Worksheet**, which will help you start thinking about high-profile assignments. The goal is to identify the types of assignments that lead to promotion at your company. You will probably want to consult with some savvy managers to help you identify the type of opportunities that lead to promotion.

3. Create tasking tool. See **example tasking tool**.

4. Have managers use tasking tool for 2-3 months to gather baseline data. This should take *no more than 5 to 10 minutes a month*.

After implementing intervention(s), participating managers will fill out the tool every month for 3-4 months, and you will send the **Work Allocation Pulse Survey** one more time.

2) *Implement Bias Interrupters for Office Housework*

- **Don't ask for volunteers.** Women and people of color are more likely to volunteer because they are under subtle but powerful pressures to do so.⁹
- **Establish a rotation.** A rotation is also helpful for many administrative tasks (e.g. taking notes, scheduling meetings, sending Zoom links). Rotating housework tasks like ordering lunch and planning parties is also an option if admins are unavailable.
- **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.”
- **Use admins.** If possible, assign office housework tasks to admins, e.g. planning birthday parties, scheduling meetings, ordering lunch.
- **Try the “plus one” system.** Have a more junior person shadow someone more senior to develop new skills — and make sure they take notes.

3) *Implement Bias Interrupters for Glamour Work*

- **Provide a bounceback.** If you have individual assigners whose glamour work allocations is lop-sided, hold a meeting to bring the problem to their attention. Work with them to figure out if either, a) the available pool for glamour work assignments is representative but is not being tapped fully or whether b) only a few people have the requisite skills for glamour work assignments. Read our **Responses to Common Pushback** and **Identifying Bias in Assignments Guide** to prepare.

a) *If a representative pool has the requisite skills...*

- **Have the supervisor implement a rotation** to ensure fair access to plum assignments.
- **Formalize the pool and institute accountability.** 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. Have the supervisor track their allocation of glamour work going forward to measure progress. Research shows that accountability matters.¹⁰

b) If the pool is not representative...

- **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 the above 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.
- **Succession planning.** Remember that having "bench strength" is important so that your department won't be left scrambling if someone unexpectedly leaves the company.
- **Shadowing and mentoring.** Have a more-junior person shadow a more-experienced person during the high-profile assignment. Establish a mentoring program to help a broader range of junior people gain access to valued skills.

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?

¹ Williams, J. C., & Dempsey, R. W. (2014). What works for women at work: Four patterns working women should know. New York, NY: New York University Press.

² Misra, J., Lundquist, J. H., & Templer, A. (2012, June). Gender, Work Time, and Care Responsibilities Among Faculty 1. In Sociological Forum (Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 300-323). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. doi: 10.1111/j.1573-7861.2012.01319.x; Mitchell, S. M., & Hesli, V. L. (2013). Women don't ask? Women don't say no? Bargaining and service in the political science profession. PS: Political Science & Politics, 46(2), 355-369. doi: 10.1017/S1049096513000073; Porter, S. R. (2007). A closer look at faculty service: What affects participation on committees?. The Journal of Higher Education, 78(5), 523-541. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2007.0027>; Benschop, Y., & Doorewaard, H. (1998). Six of one and half a dozen of the other: the gender subtext of Taylorism and team-based work. Gender, Work & Organization, 5(1), 5-18. doi: 10.1111/1468-0432.00042; Ohlott, P. J., Ruderman, M. N., & McCauley, C. D. (1994). Gender differences in managers' developmental job experiences. Academy of management Journal, 37(1), 46-67. doi: 10.5465/256769; De Pater, I. E., Van Vianen, A. E., & Bechtoldt, M. N. (2010). Gender differences in job challenge: A matter of task allocation. Gender, Work & Organization, 17(4), 433-453. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0432.2009.00477.x

³ Cooper, M. (2021). Research: Women Leaders Took on Even More Invisible Work During the Pandemic. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2021/10/research-women-took-on-even-more-invisible-work-during-the-pandemic>

⁴ Williams, J.C., Li, S., Rincon, R., & Finn, P. (2016). Climate Control: Gender and Racial Bias in Engineering? Center for WorkLife Law. UC Hastings College of the Law. Available at: <https://worklifelaw.org/publications/Climate-Control-Gender-And-Racial-Bias-InEngineering.pdf>; Williams, J.C., Korn, R. M., Rincon, R., Finn, P. (2018) Walking the Tightrope: An Examination of Bias in India's Engineering Workplace. Center for WorkLife Law. UC Hastings College of the Law. Available at: <https://worklifelaw.org/wpcontent/uploads/2018/10/Walking-the-Tightrope-Bias-Indias-Engineering-Workplace.pdf>; Williams, J. C., Multhaup, M., Li, S., Korn, R. M. (2018). You Can't Change What You Can't See: Interrupting Racial & Gender Bias in the Legal Profession. American Bar Association & Minority Corporate Counsel Association. <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/women/you-cant-change-what-you-cant-see-print.pdf>; Williams, J.C., Korn, R., & Maas, R. (2021). The Elephant in the Well-Designed Room: An Investigation Into Bias in the Architecture Profession.

⁵ Williams, J. C., Multhaup, M., Li, S., Korn, R. M. (2018).

⁶ Cech, E. A., & Waidzun, T. J. (2021). Systemic inequalities for LGBTQ professionals in STEM. *Science advances*, 7(3).

⁷ Barrero, J.M., Bloom, N., & Davis, S.J. (2021). Why Working from Home Will Stick. https://nbloom.people.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj4746/f/why_wfh_will_stick_21_april_2021.pdf; Combs, V. (2021). Slack Survey Finds That 97% of Black Knowledge Workers Want the Future of the Office to Be Remote or Hybrid. <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/slack-survey-finds-97-of-black-knowledge-workers-want-the-future-of-the-office-to-be-remote-or-hybrid/>

⁸ Babcock, L., Recalde, M. P., Vesterlund, L., & Weingart, L. (2017). Gender differences in accepting and receiving requests for tasks with low promotability. *American Economic Review*, 107(3), 714-47. doi: 10.1257/aer.20141734

⁹ Heilman M. E., & Chen J. J. (2005). Same behavior, different consequences: Reactions to men's and women's altruistic citizenship. *Behavior Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(3), 431-441. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.90.3.431; Allen, T. D. (2006). Rewarding good citizens: The relationship between citizenship behavior, gender, and organizational rewards. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 36(1), 120-143. doi: 10.1111/j.0021-9029.2006.00006.x; Babcock, L., Recalde, M. P., Vesterlund, L., & Weingart, L. (2017). Gender differences in accepting and receiving requests for tasks with low promotability. *American Economic Review*, 107(3), 714-47. doi: 10.1257/aer.20141734; Williams, J. C., & Dempsey, R. W. (2014); Berdahl, J. L., & Min, J. A. (2012). Prescriptive stereotypes and workplace consequences for East Asians in North America. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 18(2), 141-152. doi: 10.1037/a0027692

¹⁰ Tetlock, P. E. (1983). Accountability and complexity of thought. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 45(1), 74. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.45.1.74; Tetlock, P. E., & Mitchell, G. (2009). Implicit bias and accountability systems: What must organizations do to prevent discrimination?. *Research in organizational behavior*, 29, 3-38. doi: 10.1016/j.riob.2009.10.002

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BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR ASSIGNMENTS *Assignment Typology Worksheet*

Fill out the worksheet below with specific projects/types of work/assignments that fall under the categories provided below:

This process applies to: (circle one) Junior Senior Intermediate (____) Other (____)

High Profile Work:
Roles that provide the opportunities to develop deep technical expertise:
<i>Example: novel analyses</i>
1.
2.
3.
4.
Opportunities to display knowledge to leadership:
<i>Example: presenting work to senior leadership, being chosen to travel with the team, getting to be part of a special team</i>
1.
2.
3.
4.
Opportunities to connect with people in the central office:
<i>Example: completing a high-visibility task for the central office</i>
1.
2.
3.
4.
Opportunities to increase your profile and your network:
<i>Example: working on a project where someone else is leading, having the opportunity to put together a team</i>
1.
2.
3.
4.
Leadership and mentoring opportunities:
<i>Example: leading a team on a project, mentoring a junior employee</i>
1.
2.
3.
4.
Opportunities to autonomously solve an ambiguous problem:
<i>In contrast to doing a specified task in a specified way, can be big or small</i>
1.
2.
3.
4.

Opportunities to deal with the outside customer and learn what they want:

Example: leading a project with an outside customer

1.

2.

3.

4.

Assignments central to the company mission:

Example: something that creates value or is likely to bring in future work

1.

2.

3.

4.

Other high-profile assignments in your organization that lead to promotion:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Routine Work: Work that must be done well but does not typically enhance promotion prospects:

Example: running tests before a product launch, quality assurance, document review, or project management

1.

2.

3.

4.

Work that supports the organization: Essential day-to-day tasks that keep everything running smoothly:

Example: Taking notes at meetings, managing documents and data, keeping track of budgets

1.

2.

3.

4.

Teambuilding work: Work that promotes the harmony of the group

Example: playing the peacemaker role, keeping working relationships running smoothly

1.

2.

3.

4.

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BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR ASSIGNMENTS

Example Tasking Tool

Tasking Tool

What's your name?

List all of your direct reports who you regularly assign work to. Please provide their first and last names.

Direct report name

Direct report name

Direct report name

Tasking Tool

Fill out this page with types of work/assignments that fall under the categories provided below.

Feel free to label each opportunity in a way that makes sense to you. The objective is to make sure you are placing the task in the right category, not to explain it to an outside party.

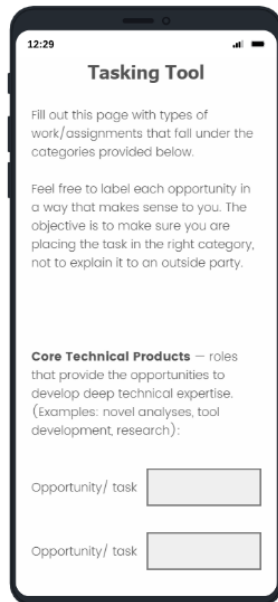
Core Technical Products — roles that provide the opportunities to develop deep technical expertise. (Examples: novel analyses, tool development, research):

Opportunity/ task

Opportunity/ task

Opportunity/ task

Technical Leadership — leadership and mentoring opportunities. (Examples:



Tasking Tool

Please match up your direct reports with the opportunities they have worked on during the past month by checking the corresponding boxes.

Core Technical Products

	Rachel	Asma	Joan	Raafiya
Novel analyses	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tool development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Research	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR ASSIGNMENTS *Identifying Bias in Assignments Guide*

What's the difference between assignments?

- ***Glamour Work:*** high-profile assignments that are career-enhancing and provide the opportunity to develop the competencies, visibility, and networks needed to progress.
- ***Low-Profile Work:*** assignments that are necessary and beneficial to the organization but don't advance the individual's career.
- ***Office Housework:*** literal housework (ordering lunch, cleaning up after a meeting), administrative work (scheduling a time to meet, making sure everyone is on the conference line, sending the Zoom link), emotional work ("he's upset—can you fix it?"), and behind-the-scenes work (setting up the summer intern program).

Tendencies that lead to inequities in assignments:

- ***Modest, helpful, nice; dutiful daughter, office mom?*** Prescriptive stereotypes create pressures on women to be mild-mannered team players—so they are under social pressures to volunteer for office housework activities.¹ Due to these stereotypes, women are also more likely to be *assigned* office housework tasks because assigners tend to believe that women are more likely to accept the task.²
- ***People of color*** also face pressures to volunteer for and accept office housework, due to prescriptive stereotypes, notably that people of Asian descent are supposed to be "deferential worker bees."³
- ***Not a "details guy."*** Dominant group* members are less likely to be asked to do the office housework, and they experience less backlash if they refuse to do it or do a bad job.
- ***"Not a team player."*** Women and people of color risk pushback if they don't gratefully accept and perform the office housework and low-profile work: "She's just not a team player," or "He thinks highly of himself, doesn't he?"
- ***The mommy track.*** Women return from maternity leave to find that they are no longer able to get the quality of assignments that they could before having children.
- ***"But she's good at planning parties."*** Managers tend to assign office housework to women because "she's good at it," or "she likes it."
- ***Golden boy.*** Managers may consistently assign glamour work to the same person over and over again because the manager knows "he can get the job done." This can lead to a precarious position for a company where only one or two people are capable of doing the most important work.
- ***Who wants the glamour work?*** Women and people of color get less access to the glamour work in their organizations.⁴ Sometimes this is due to the belief that they don't want the high-profile assignments. Data shows this isn't true.⁵
- ***People with disabilities*** get passed over for career-enhancing work due to negative assumptions about their capabilities or fit for the work.⁶

* Who is the dominant group in your workplace? Look at which group predominates in the company's top positions.

- **Out of sight, out of mind.** What the military calls “hey you” tasking — making assignments based on whoever happens to be around — leads to the same people getting tapped again and again, while others get left out despite their talents. If women, caregivers, and people of color are more likely to prefer remote work,⁷ an informal assignment system can negatively impact their access to career-enhancing opportunities.⁸

Seven Powerful Bias Interrupters:

1. **Don’t ask for volunteers** for office housework. Instead **establish a rotation**. This can be based on any factor—seniority, astrological sign, etc.
2. **Hold everyone accountable** for the tasks they are supposed to do. If someone does a bad job on a low-profile assignment, that’s a performance problem. Treat it as such.
3. **Demonstrate that you value mentoring** when it comes time for performance evaluations and promotion decisions.
4. Before assigning a glamour work assignment, **consider all eligible employees**.
5. If only a few people are eligible to do the glamour work, find ways to **expand the pool**. One way is to have more junior people shadow more senior people.
6. **Ask people returning from parental leave** if they want the assignment before deciding they don’t. You can say, “I have this assignment you would be great for, but I know you’re getting back up to speed. Want to jump in? If not, there will be another opportunity in the future.” – and make sure there is.
7. **Ask everyone on your team what support they need to do their best work**. Not all disabilities are visible, and making this a regular practice will enhance everyone’s performance.

¹ Allen, T. D. (2006). Rewarding good citizens: The relationship between citizenship behavior, gender, and organizational rewards. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 36(1), 120-143. doi: 10.1111/j.0021-9029.2006.00006.x

Babcock, L., Recalde, M. P., Vesterlund, L., & Weingart, L. (2017). Gender differences in accepting and receiving requests for tasks with low promotability. *American Economic Review*, 107(3), 714-47. doi: 10.1257/aer.20141734

² Ibid

³ Berdahl, J. L., & Min, J. A. (2012). Prescriptive stereotypes and workplace consequences for East Asians in North America. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 18(2), 141-152. doi: 10.1037/a0027692

⁴ Williams, J.C., Li, S., Rincon, R., & Finn, P. (2016). Climate Control: Gender and Racial Bias in Engineering? Center for WorkLife Law. UC Hastings College of the Law. Available at: <https://worklifelaw.org/publications/Climate-Control-Gender-And-Racial-Bias-In-Engineering.pdf>

⁵ Williams, J. C., & Multhaup, M. (2018). For women and minorities to get ahead, managers must assign work fairly. *Harvard Business Review*, 2-9. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2018/03/for-women-and-minorities-to-get-ahead-managers-must-assign-work-fairly>

⁶ Jones, G. E. (1997). Advancement opportunity issues for persons with disabilities. *Human Resource Management Review*, 7(1), 55-76.; Sherbin, L., & Kennedy, J.T. (2017). The Case for Improving Work for People With Disabilities Goes Way Beyond Compliance.

⁷ Barrero, J.M., Bloom, N., & Davis, S.J. (2021). Why Working from Home Will Stick.

https://nbloom.people.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj4746/f/why_wfh_will_stick_21_april_2021.pdf; Combs, V. (2021). Slack Survey Finds That 97% of Black Knowledge Workers Want the Future of the Office to Be Remote or Hybrid. <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/slack-survey-finds-97-of-black-knowledge-workers-want-the-future-of-the-office-to-be-remote-or-hybrid/>

⁸ The Center for WorkLife Law. (2021). Hybrid Work Best Practice Guide. <https://biasinterrupters.org/wp-content/uploads/hybrid-work-best-practice-guide.pdf>.

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BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR ASSIGNMENTS *Work Allocation Pulse Survey*

How much time have you spent on the following tasks compared to peers with similar seniority and experience?

For each task, check the box under the category that most closely corresponds with the amount of time you have spent on a task compared to peers.

	Less than peers	Same amount as peers	More than peers
Admin work – taking notes, finding a time to meet, scheduling meetings, managing paperwork and budgets			
Literal housework – planning parties or showers, getting coffee/food for meetings or cleaning up after			
Undervalued work – mentoring or behind-the-scenes work that has to get done but does not typically lead to promotion			
Opportunities to display knowledge to higher-ups/leadership			
Working on high-visibility/desirable assignments			
Opportunities to gain new knowledge or become a subject matter expert			
Internal or external networking opportunities that are critical for promotions or compensation			
Leading or managing teams			

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BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR ASSIGNMENTS *Work Allocation Pulse Survey*

How Do I Use This Survey?

1. **Build this short survey into your system and circulate it to your team.**
2. **Look at the amount of time each team member is spending on different office housework tasks.**

Do certain groups of people spend more time in general than their peers? What about on specific types of work: literal housework, administrative work, undervalued work? Start there, then head to the **Bias Interrupters Assignments Toolkit** to learn how to level the playing field.

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BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR ASSIGNMENTS *Responses to Common Pushback*

Here are some of the most common justifications that supervisors/managers give for why plum assignments go to a homogenous pool, and women end up with office housework—and some responses:

“It needs to get done, and the women are the only ones who volunteer!”

“Staffing office housework by asking for volunteers puts subtle pressures on women to volunteer, to show they’re good team players. It also put equal pressures on men *not* to volunteer, to show they’re go getters. Instead, allocate tasks like parties to admins; for the rest set up a rotation so that less valued work gets shared out equally.”

“The women just do a better job at it. When I give it to the men, they blow it off, so I end up having to give it to a woman anyway.”

“That’s because the women sense that there will be negative consequences if they blow it off—they’ll be dinged as prima donnas. And the men know that if they do a bad job, the only consequence is that they won’t be asked to do office housework again.”

“He worked out successfully in the past,” “I trust him to do a good job.”

“This is justifiable in a crisis. But operating always in crisis mode is not good for the organization in the long term. It means that the person who happens to get a career-enhancing assignment the first time around becomes the golden employee, excluding others who are equally talented from career opportunities. That means they will leave—and the golden employee may leave, too, because they’re asked to do the same thing over and over again.”

“I’m too busy to train someone new.”

“That may work well for you in the short term, but it will hurt the organization in the long term, as we lose valued people who are not given career-development opportunities. Having a deeper bench also gives you insurance: What if your go-to-guy gets hit by a bus or leaves the company? Taking a little time today could save you time and money in the future.”