

[BIAS INTERRUPTERS] *small steps big change*

BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR MANAGERS

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 diversity 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 DEI.³ The common practice of assigning large loads of diversity advocacy 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

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. 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

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:

- Distribute the **Office Housework Survey** to your team to find out who is doing the office housework and how much of their time it takes up.
- Use our **Assignment Typology Guide** to gather further metrics on what assignments fall into your department’s office housework and glamour work.

2. *Implement Bias Interrupters for diversity work*

- **Don't assume** employees who hold historically excluded identities can or would like to take on DEI work on top of their technical roles.
- **Consider hiring a DEI director** whose sole job function is to do the DEI work.
- **Make it clear that this is valued work.** Sometimes organizations say they highly value this kind of work—but they don't. When it comes time for performance evaluations and promotion decisions, make sure that mentoring and DEI work are recognized and that employees are compensated for the extra time they spend on this work.
- **Provide administrative support and adequate funding** for people running diversity initiatives and Employee Resource Groups (ERGs).

3. *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.

4. *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 diverse 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 diverse 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 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 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.

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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., & Waidunas, 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.

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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](https://doi.org/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