

## The road to flexibility? Challenging stubborn work norms

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The advent of flexible work arrangements has undeniably revolutionized the modern workplace, giving employees greater control over their schedules and enhancing work-life balance. Despite lauded as a boon for women’s labour-force participation, flexibility presents unique challenges.

Proximity bias and productivity paranoia are among these hurdles, and they pose real threats to gender equality progress. Without a paradigm shift in work culture, flexibility can be a double-edged sword, inadvertently reinforcing entrenched work norms, obstructing diversity, and inclusion efforts.

### **Bias thrives in the office bubble.**

Proximity bias, often referred to as the “out of sight, out of mind” phenomenon, underscores how employers and colleagues tend to favour those physically present in traditional office settings. This bias manifests as a natural inclination to prioritize and allocate opportunities, recognition, and

engagement to those individuals who share the same physical space, thereby potentially overshadowing the contributions and talents of remote or distant team members.

A study from the [Society for Human Resource Management](#) revealed that 67% of supervisors perceive remote workers as more easily replaceable than those who work on-site and 62% think that working remotely full-time harms employees' career prospects. Approximately 42% of supervisors admit to occasionally overlooking remote workers when delegating tasks, and nearly three-quarters prefer having all their staffs onsite.

### **When recognition stays remote, too**

[A research conducted by Bloom and colleagues](#) and published in the Quarterly Journal of Economics, focusing on a Chinese travel agency, found that despite their heightened productivity, remote workers suffered a 50% reduction in promotion rates compared to in-office colleagues. This paradox raises critical questions about the fairness of promotion criteria, biases in play, and the inherent undervaluation of remote employees, as traditional career progression relies heavily on physical presence.

The absence of recognition impacts not only career advancement but also prompts some individuals to actively avoid pursuing promotions. Highly productive, well-compensated remote employees may resist promotions if they entail returning to the office, a transition they find undesirable. Moreover, the limited opportunities for remote workers to develop essential interpersonal skills in virtual settings could hinder their chances for managerial promotions, which typically require strong leadership and communication abilities.

### **Productivity unlocked, but at what cost?**

The rise of remote work has also transformed the way workers approach productivity in the workplace. Though it offers employees freedom to pursue their goals according to their individual work styles,

remote workers might find themselves working longer hours and taking fewer breaks to prove their worth. There is a prevailing notion that one must maintain unwavering productivity to justify the privilege of remote work. This mentality can inadvertently lead to excessive work hours and, ultimately, burnout.

[The same study by Bloom and colleagues](#) reveals that a substantial part of the 13% productivity surge associated with remote work can be traced back to the extension of working hours and the reduction in break times, accounting for a significant three-quarters of this overall increase. The flexibility of remote work often blurs the lines between work and personal life. As a result, remote employees find themselves devoting additional time to their responsibilities, occasionally extending beyond their regular hours, driven by the demands of their roles and the need to be consistently accessible.

### **Breaking resistance**

Proximity bias and productivity paranoia can affect both genders in the workplace. However, women could be disproportionately impacted due to their greater preference for flexible work. Women often juggle substantial domestic responsibilities, and remote work can offer them the flexibility to balance these roles with their careers. A recent [Harris poll](#) revealed that a higher percentage of women, 52%, express a preference for continuing remote work compared to 41% of men. Additionally, over 60% of women find working from home more energizing, and 58% feel more engaged, while around 50% of men share these sentiments.

When men encounter challenges related to flexible work, it indirectly exacerbates the impact on women. It not only reinforces stereotypes but also restricts their ability to challenge societal norms. Men choosing flexible work may be viewed as unconventional, hindering advancements in dismantling gender roles and achieving a more equal division of domestic duties. This cycle of reinforcement impedes the broader societal shift necessary for true gender equality and prevents the normalization of flexible work choices for both men and women.

Embracing flexible work as the future demands proactive measures from companies. Inclusive practices, unbiased performance metrics, and empowering remote workers in decision-making are crucial. Technology fostering seamless collaboration across distances is pivotal. Societal attitudes and traditional work norms must also evolve to fully embrace the potential of flexible work. If not, aspirations for flexibility might backfire, worsening equality efforts. Striking a balance between progressive policies, inclusive corporate practices, and societal shifts is vital to ensure the transformative potential of flexible work is harnessed without reinforcing existing biases.