

Proximity Bias: The Distance We Need to Bridge

Jason Liem addresses the assumption that people are more productive in an office environment than at home

When COVID-19 forced us to work from home, it required us to adapt our ways of collaborating, communicating and cooperating online. It was a steep learning curve for most of us to discover what worked well and what didn't. In some instances, it required fresh thinking and novel ways of doing things.

One of the more salient points to have arisen from the pandemic is that we can still be productive when working remotely. We can still have effective meetings when conducted online. We are still able to move projects forward, although we are planning virtually.

As the pandemic wanes and more of the population gets vaccinated, we will be returning to the office, but it will be a different working environment than when we left it all those months ago.

Most likely, most companies will choose a hybrid working solution (a combination of in-office and remote working) if they have not already done so. Working from home two to three days a week will become part of the norm, but this doesn't mean the transition will not be without its own unique set of challenges.

Proximity Bias

I believe proximity bias will be one of these challenges that individuals, teams, and organisations will have to handle.

What is proximity bias?

I think we can give it two definitions.

One form of proximity bias is the potential anxiety or awkwardness of being too close to people after being habituated to the practice of social distancing after so many months.

The other form, the more traditional definition, is when we overvalue what's close to us in time and space. In organisational



terms, we assume that people are more productive in an office environment than at home.

Proximity bias, like all cognitive biases, influence us on an unconscious level. Most of the time, we are not even aware of how they taint our choices and beliefs.

Close Proximity

When I talk to clients, they are looking forward to getting back to the office, even if it is only two or three days a week. Many of them miss the early morning person to person chats, eating lunch together, and the spontaneous interactions that can happen throughout the day.

One of the things that the pandemic has burned into our brains is the act of physical safety through social distancing. The length of time that we have worked from home and the routines we've adopted to keep physically safe have, without a doubt, formed into physical and mental habits.

The fact is, COVID-19 is going to be with us even as offices open and lock-downs ease. In-person meetings may require us to wear a mask and keep physical distancing due to perceived biological safety. The proximity to others can trigger awkwardness and anxiety (this shows up differently depending on the person). Post-COVID, in-person meetings and conversations will inevitably involve awkward elements that

we never had to consider before. What will be the new rules of engagement?

When we meet each other, will we shake hands, touch elbows, tap feet or nod? How should we react if someone removes their mask? How will the interaction be between someone who is vaccinated and someone who has chosen not to be vaccinated? How should we behave if someone sneezes or coughs during a meeting? How should we respond if someone breaks social distancing? What are the new comfort zone norms? What should we do if someone offers us a cup of coffee and hands it to us?

These questions may seem trivial, but these small details can derail a person's focus and engagement.

I am hoping that this is not an issue a year from now, but only in the first few months. I think teams and organisations would benefit by addressing it.

Gather Awareness

The reality of social distancing may still exist when organisations return to the office. Social distancing means logistics and planning are going to be paramount when combating proximity bias. A company may have to think about structural changes needed to accommodate these new constraints, such as larger meeting rooms equipped with video conferencing facilities.

Another idea is for different teams to meet occasionally to learn from each other. They can create a list of best practices as to what they have discovered works well to deal with proximity bias and create a more inclusive working environment.

The following questions can focus the discussion:

- What have we learned that works well?
- What have we learned that doesn't work so well?
- What more could we do?



- What could we do less of?
- What could we either change or eliminate to improve things?

The Very Near Future

We have gathered a massive amount of know-how and experience as to what works well remotely. At the same time, remote working has made apparent those jobs that are best done in the office, such as brainstorming sessions, onboarding new employees, providing sensitive feedback, negotiations, and critical strategic and operational decisions.

When we consider the reality of hybrid working arrangements, it will require us to adapt how we collaborate and communicate.

One part of proximity bias that organisations need to address is the antiquated assumption that people are more productive in an office environment than at home.

There is the tendency to overvalue those colleagues that are physically present over those that are connected remotely. (This is the same phenomenon people working in field offices sometimes experience in relation to their company's head office.)

Unless organisations establish protocols to involve remote team members, this can unintentionally make them feel excluded, and rejected.

Social Pain

Rejection hurts whether it is intentional or unintentional. Our brains naturally encourage us to be social, and the pain that rejection causes is a social pain as real as physical pain. Matthew Lieberman, a social psychologist from the UCLA

Department of Psychology, proved this in the following study:

In a video game called Cyberball, participants, while hooked up to an fMRI scanner, believed they were tossing a virtual ball with two other players. They didn't know that the other two people were avatars. After a few minutes of throwing the ball around, the programmed avatars stopped throwing the ball to the actual participant and continued to throw the ball to each other.

The researchers asked the participants to leave the scanner and then asked them questions about their experience. When asked how they felt, some said they were angry, and others said they were sad. In other words, they felt rejected. When the researchers compared the fMRI results to the scan of someone in physical pain, there was no doubt that social pain showed similar markers.

So how do employers ensure they treat employees working remotely the same as in-person, office-based workers?

Dealing with Proximity Bias

One way of combating bias is gaining the awareness behind how it influences our behaviour, thinking and decision-making. A second step is to implement procedures to try to mitigate the possibility of proximity bias.

Openly discussing this division of work amongst a team provides the opportunity to air ideas, opinions, and concerns and translate them into accepted protocols. These protocols outline how to provide formal and informal channels to keep all team members, regardless of geographical location, updated and informed of important decisions.

Another variable to consider is cross-departmental meetings that involve input

from different teams. It is one thing to agree on a fixed office day within a team, but the complexity increases when sessions involve more than one team.

In such meetings, it will probably be a combination of in-office and virtual participants. The facilitator must be vigilant about inviting remote participants to share ideas to counter the natural tendency to engage more often with physically present ones.

At the same time, the meeting head will need to recognise that not being able to see interactions can intimidate and ultimately prevent those not in the room from sharing. If the meeting leader does not intentionally include people from different locations, he/she will inevitably exclude them.

Conclusion

I think it is important not to overcomplicate the problem. Yes, the hybrid way of working will include new ways of engaging people and some different constraints, but we need to remember that some companies had been working like this long before the pandemic landed.

It is essential to bring this idea to the table sooner rather than later – to open the discussion to find agreement and rules of engagement. And as time moves on, it will become apparent as to what works and what doesn't.

Teams and companies have adapted to remote working; many of them are thriving. I do not doubt that their ingenuity will find ways to evolve to the hybrid form of working.

With that said, keeping open channels of communication and collaboration will undoubtedly contribute to combating proximity bias when returning to the office.



Jason W Birkevold Liem helps people to think about their thinking so they are better at managing themselves, others and situations. He achieves this through an informative and engaging process that educates people about the brain, cognitive psychology and interpersonal communication. As a result, clients are better able to face their professional and private challenges with more confidence, certainty and clarity. Through his company,

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