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# Will return-to-office mandates prevent proximity bias for employees working from home?

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## Abstract

This Practice and Policy article examines return-to-office mandates, the latest human resource controversy. These mandates are an organisational directive for employees who have been working from home to return to working in their employer's premise. Drawing on the literature and our research on working from home and hybrid working, we consider whether mandates may prevent proximity bias. We conclude that mandates requiring employees to return to the office or caps which limit working from home are not only unnecessary, but may have negative consequences. In particular, mandates may cause employee resentment, while caps limit flexibility and autonomy. We therefore do not advocate the use of these mechanisms, and recommend that managers and teams negotiate the appropriate balance of home and office working arrangements.

## KEYWORDS

proximity bias, public sector, remote working, teleworking, working from home

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### Points for practitioners

- Mechanisms which force employees into the office can be seen as an easy and effective way to mitigate proximity bias. However, they can lead to employee resentment.
- Similarly, capping the number of days employees can work from home can also result in negative consequences, including reduced flexibility and employee autonomy.
- Enabling managers and teams to collaboratively determine their own in office/working from home arrangements will maintain flexibility and prevent employee resentment.
- Preventing proximity bias can be achieved through increasing awareness about this emerging form of bias; harnessing communication technologies to moderate visibility regardless of where work is performed; and ensuring performance management systems are based on quantifiable and objective metrics.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The latest human resource issue within public services, and more broadly, both in Australia and internationally, is return-to-office mandates. These are organisational directives for employees who have been working from home, in continuation of ways of working established by the pandemic—to return to working in their employer's premise. Return-to-office mandates gained currency internationally when Elon Musk, Twitter CEO, directed employees back to the office in 2022 (Lebowitz et al., 2023). Other organisations, including Amazon, Apple, Disney, Google, IBM, Meta, Starbucks, and Tesla, followed suit (Lebowitz et al., 2023). In contrast, the Australian public service (APS) has removed a mandatory cap on the amount of time an employee can work from home, recognising the benefits of hybrid working (APSC, 2023).

In this Practice and Policy paper, we consider whether return-to-office mandates may prevent or mitigate proximity bias and what this might mean for practitioners. This form of bias is a phenomenon that '...describes the tendency of leadership to show favouritism or preferential treatment to employees that are close to them physically' (Lutkevich, 2023). We also examine the use of a cap on the number of days employees can work from home, which effectively mandates the minimum number of days employees are required to be on their employer's premise. We examine both academic and practitioner literature and present our findings on hybrid working, to inform future directions for practitioners.

## 2 | IMPACTS OF PROXIMITY BIAS

Practitioner literature has found that proximity bias can negatively impact organisations through not fully utilising remote workers' skills and knowledge. This can lead to decreased employee engagement and retention if employees are not seen, valued, consulted, and able to participate in decision-making (du Bey, 2022; Kovalik, 2021; Lutkevich, 2023). Proximity bias can also increase inequalities, as women and people from marginalised communities are more likely to prefer working hybridly than employees in dominant demographic groups (Williamson & Colley, 2022). Recent industry research (Parmelee & Codd, 2023) supports these concerns, with women working hybridly reporting exclusion from decision-making activities and insufficient access to senior leaders.

Academics have tended to focus on visibility, rather than on proximity bias, to determine whether working from home has negative impacts. According to Maruyama and Tietze (2012), a quarter of respondents in their pre-pandemic study experienced reduced visibility and career advancement when working from home for at least 50% of the time. This impact is gendered, with women and mothers experiencing more severe impacts than men employees (Maruyama & Tietze, 2012). Similarly, Golden and Eddleston (2020) found that telecommuters who had lower levels of face-to-face contact with their supervisor experienced lower salary growth than those who had higher levels of in-person contact. Other research found that wage penalties held for highly educated women working from home, but not for less educated women. The former group were more heavily penalised for not adhering to the ideal worker norm, which is dependent on visibility in the workplace (Fuller & Hirsh, 2019).

Overall, the literature suggests that those who work from home extensively are penalised. Hybrid working, then, may avoid such penalties and mitigate proximity bias. Mandating a return to the office can also be seen as a way to prevent proximity bias. However, emerging practitioner research shows that forcing employees to return leads to resentment, impedes autonomy, and can result in lower morale and engagement from employees forced to comply with the mandate (Castillon, 2023). Our research also suggests that capping the amount of time employees can work at home causes resentment and other negativities, as we next discuss.

## 3 | OUR RESEARCH

In 2021, the first author surveyed almost 5000 APS employees about working from home. The 2021 survey asked a range of questions focused on experiences working from home including capturing working from home arrangements and levels of managerial support. Nearly 50% of respondents stated that their organisation imposed a cap on the amount of time they could work from home (Williamson & Colley, 2022). The most common cap was 40%, that is two days a week for full-time employees. This figure may be higher, however, as almost 40% of employees were unaware of whether or not a cap was in place. Analysis of written comments shows that this 40% was an arbitrary figure.

In 2023, we conducted 20 focus groups and spoke with over 80 APS managers about hybrid working. We asked about their organisation's policy on hybrid working, how they managed those working hybridly, and any challenges experienced. We found that managers considered that working from home for only two days a week limited autonomy and flexibility for themselves and their team. We found inconsistent application of the working from home policies, and some

participants disliked the requirement to be in the office. Some were aware of the visibility issues for career development but challenged the reasons for requiring face-to-face presence based on arbitrary caps. Some said their decision to return to the office was for visibility and to connect with senior leaders, indicating that proximity bias is a real risk of working from home. Additionally, we found that more senior managers in the APS attended the office more than middle managers and employees, which also risks proximity bias for remote workers. Mechanisms which force employees into the office can be seen as an easy and effective way to mitigate proximity bias. However, they can lead to employee resentment and other negative impacts. Alternatives exist to prevent proximity bias, as we next discuss.

## 4 | WAYS FORWARD

Managers would do well to consider a range of contextual factors to evaluate the likelihood and impact of proximity bias. These include consciously acknowledging this bias and its potential impacts, as well as reflecting on the demographic constitution of a team to determine which employees may prefer to work at home the most. It is important for managers to consider how flexible working can benefit diverse employees and organisations and engage in conversations with their teams about how these benefits can be better achieved through actively taking measures to mitigate negative impacts of proximity bias. Mechanisms and avenues for engagement and communication also need consideration, particularly in terms of how they can be harnessed to help moderate visibility for employees regardless of where work is performed. Finally, performance management systems can exacerbate proximity bias, and it may be beneficial for managers to consider opportunities to engage differently with these systems as they manage their hybrid working team.

Practitioner literature provides ample suggestions on how to prevent proximity bias, actualising the contextual factors discussed above. First, organisations can ensure they recognise this form of bias (du Bey, 2022; Kovalik, 2022; Lutkevich, 2023). This can be achieved through human resource practitioners providing managers with information about proximity bias, and how this can be prevented. This could include, for example, encouraging managers to keep records of task allocation, to ensure high-profile work and career development opportunities are distributed evenly throughout the team. Second, as well as regular team meetings, organisations and managers should proactively create opportunities for engagement. This can take the form of implementing an anchor day one day a week to bring employees together, as well as better utilisation of communication technologies to ensure equal opportunity to contribute regardless of work location. Third, building inclusive cultures can also alleviate proximity bias (Hirsch, 2022; Lutkevich, 2023). For example, requiring all employees to be virtual in meetings can assist inclusivity (de Bey, 2022; Kovalik, 2022). Fourth, ensuring those conducting performance reviews use quantifiable and objective metrics will also reduce proximity bias (du Bey, 2022; Kovalik, 2022; Lutkevich, 2023). While performance management systems may aim to be objective and quantifiable, training managers to focus on outcomes, rather than where work is performed, will also assist in reducing proximity bias.

Finally, enabling employees to choose where they work can increase 'location autonomy' (Spivack & Milosevic, 2018). This is particularly important for knowledge workers as it enables them to work in locations which best meet their needs, leading to positive individual and organisational outcomes. However, enabling employees to choose their location may increase the incidence of working from home and exacerbate existing inequalities. We therefore suggest that managers, in

conjunction with their teams, determine the optimal hybrid working arrangements which best benefit individuals, the team, and the organisation. We encourage teams to negotiate systems to enable hybrid working, such as rosters and workflow systems. These practical suggestions, combined with the removal of the cap and mandatory working in the office for APS employees, will maintain or increase flexibility, prevent employee resentment, and reduce potential impacts of proximity bias.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly; therefore, supporting data are not available.

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