

# Subtle Workplace Bias Undermines Productivity and Well-Being, Study Finds

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A new [study](#) of people who have experienced [workplace discrimination](#) showed that over one-fourth experience forms of “workplace bias” that are “common, impactful, and beyond their ability to manage,” leading to increased frustration, stress, depression, and helplessness. Nearly half of the subjects interviewed about workplace bias said that such incidents happen regularly, while about 60 percent felt they had no effective means to manage such incidents, and about two-thirds said the discriminatory treatment had a “large impact” on their engagement and commitment to the organization.

## The Effects of Subtle Bias

Federal and most state laws prohibit [discrimination](#) on the basis of race, national origin, religion, sex, age, and disability, among other protected traits. Generally, an employer must take an adverse employment action against an employee because of the protected trait to be held liable for discrimination. [Adverse actions](#) are those that result in a change in the terms or conditions of employment – such as a demotion, suspension, or termination – but can also include the creation of a hostile working environment.

The workplace discrimination study reported, however, that subtler yet insidious forms of workplace bias can be detrimental to employees’ performance and well-being. In such interactions, discriminatory animus was not readily apparent, but these situations left employees feeling distinctly unwelcome, excluded, singled out, or otherwise disadvantaged because of their protected trait.

## Types of Subtle Discrimination

The study, which was conducted by leadership training company VitalSmarts, included interviews with 500 people about their experiences with workplace bias. The interviewers analyzed their stories and found seven predominant themes in the subjects’ experiences:

**Hiding their identities:** Employees were warned against expressing themselves, e.g., LGBT women were warned to avoid mentioning a “wife” or to dress in a more “feminine” way.

**Lacking credibility:** Employees found themselves interrupted or discounted, or excluded from meetings altogether.

**Inappropriate comments as “jokes”:** Colleagues and supervisors tried to retract blatantly intolerant comments by explaining that they were only joking or did not mean it.

**“Indirect” inappropriate comments:** Colleagues and supervisors thought it acceptable to make inappropriate comments as long as they were not directed at an employee, e.g., made about customers or public figures, or made outside of the workplace.

**Feeling unwelcome:** Employees were excluded from both work-related and social gatherings and conversations, colleagues “forgot” to invite them, or social conversations abruptly stopped when they joined the conversation.

**Unequal punishment and scrutiny:** Managers and coworkers scrutinized employees more heavily than others, found faults that they did not find in others’ similar work, and gave unequal punishments.

**Critiquing behavior:** Supervisors and coworkers told women, minority, and older employees that they are “aggressive,” “lack executive presence,” or do not “fit” into the culture, but the same performance by younger white male employees was well-received.

Nearly half (49 percent) of the subjects reported that this type of treatment occurs regularly in the

workplace. About two-thirds (66 percent) felt that workplace bias had a “large impact on their engagement, morale, motivation, commitment and desire to advance in the organization.” About 60 percent said that they “did not feel they could master incidents of bias in the moment or prevent them from recurring in the future.”

### **Subtle Bias Can Help Prove Adverse Action**

While most of the examples cited may not necessarily amount to adverse employment actions, when viewed in isolation, examples of such treatment can be used to prove that bias may have motivated specific employment actions that do constitute adverse actions. Further, it is important to note that employers may be liable for allowing a hostile work environment to persist, and these forms of biased interactions could contribute to a hostile environment. However, for a pattern of comments and conduct to amount to a hostile work environment, the conduct must rise to a “severe or pervasive” level, and there must be a basis for believing that the treatment is based on the employee’s protected trait. Even where the conduct does not rise to a legally actionable level, this study demonstrates that these incidents of workplace bias are still toxic and detrimental to the health, productivity, and professional advancement of employees.

### **Employers Should Proactively Confront Bias**

Accordingly, it is more important than ever that the culture in workplaces change. To confront the feelings of helplessness reported, the study provided advice for how employees on an individual level can initiate dialogue with their employers to confront workplace bias productively, noting that “people who initiate honest, frank and respectful dialogue build understanding and cultures of respect.”

Absent from this commentary, however, were steps that employers should proactively take to confront invidious workplace cultures that condone such incidents. From a legal standpoint, employers must be on notice of discrimination or harassment before they are required to take remedial action. But given the serious detrimental effects of workplace bias incidents on employees’ well-being and productivity, employers certainly stand to benefit from taking prophylactic steps to ensure that the workplace culture affords all employees dignity and respect, and does not impede their ability to advance professionally based on their identities.