



Traditional Bias
Training Doesn't
Work—
Bias Interrupters Do

HUMAN CAPITAL CENTER

In partnership with:



» Unexamined bias—that is, systems or individuals who unfairly favor some groups over others—hurts employees and organizations. Bias has many negative effects: companies don't tap the full talent pool when hiring; employees can't do their best work; unwanted attrition occurs when people leave due to lack of opportunities.

However, it is possible to prevent these negative effects of bias in the workplace. Companies can make steady year-on-year progress toward their diversity, equity & inclusion (DEI) goals by using Bias Interrupters and following the lessons to ensure success and avoid common derailers. This report shares the findings of the two-year project by Equality Action Center (EAC) and The Conference Board applying the Bias Interrupters framework to the systems and processes of select Members of The Conference Board Human Capital Center, made possible by a generous grant from Walmart.

Trusted Insights for What's Ahead™

- **Bias is a business issue.** US corporations spent almost \$8 billion on bias training in 2020 alone, but many of those trainings are ineffective. Companies that want to successfully interrupt bias in their business systems should consider using Bias Interrupters, an approach based on evidence, action, and commitment.
- **The successful implementation of Bias Interrupters depends on six key factors.** Organizations that are hoping to see improvements in bias must have: 1) leadership buy-in; 2) an email from an executive sponsor; 3) well-designed data systems; 4) the ability to teach employees effective ways to interrupt bias; 5) a strong project manager; and 6) a commitment to take action.
- **Interrupting bias in hiring enables organizations to hire the most qualified candidates by using evidence to tap the full talent pool.** For example, at a manufacturing firm, men and women of color's share of offers increased between five and six percentage points after the Bias Interrupters intervention. Companies should add structure to their hiring and recruitment processes to ensure all candidates are evaluated on the same job-relevant criteria.
- **Interrupting bias in performance evaluations leads to better-quality, more fair evaluations for all employees.** For example, after the Bias Interrupters intervention, there was a 52-percentage point increase in evidence-based feedback across all groups at a consumer goods organization and a 19-percentage point reduction in personality comments at a large retail company. To make sure evaluations are unbiased and useful, companies need to develop specific, actionable competency criteria and require evidence.
- **Keeping track of who gets valued assignments levels the playing field to create fair access to career-enhancing work.** For example, in one department of an energy company, the disparity in who had access to the career-enhancing core technical work dropped from 13 percentage points to zero after the Bias Interrupters intervention. Organizations that want to guarantee their top talent has access to career-enhancing work should keep track and make changes when they see bias.

- **Well-designed bias training helps reduce bias in everyday workplace interactions.** For example, after a 90-minute Bias Interrupters workshop at a professional services firm, the disparity between White men and women of color fell from 27 percentage points to zero with respect to who did “literal office housework” like planning parties and clean-up. Companies should use metrics to pinpoint bias in their workplaces and run effective trainings to address problem areas.
- **Organizations must avoid common derailers when implementing DEI programs.** The Bias Interrupters approach will be less successful when companies fail to address: a lack of leadership buy-in, unstable business conditions, ineffective internal workshop delivery, lack of functionality of data management systems, and issues around sustainability.

The Bias Interrupters Approach

The Bias Interrupters program was developed to address the problem, documented by EAC’s [studies of six different industries](#), that a company’s business systems reflect the bias of people traditionally hired, who then tend to hire and promote similar people. The [Bias Interrupters](#) framework is a paradigm-shifting approach to DEI that reflects the experiences of over 100,000 employees.

It consistently documents five basic patterns of bias:

1. **Prove-It-Again bias:** Some groups have to provide more evidence of competence in order to be seen as equally competent.
2. **Tightrope bias:** Authoritative and ambitious behavior that is readily accepted from White men is less readily accepted from other groups.
3. **Maternal Wall bias:** Motherhood triggers strong negative competence and commitment assumptions.
4. **Tug of War bias:** Bias against a group can fuel conflict within the group.
5. **Racial bias that differs by group:** People of color in majority-White workplaces face additional forms of bias based on racial stereotypes that differ by group.

Bias Interrupters’ premise is straightforward: to address systemic bias, you need to change systems. To successfully interrupt bias in the workplace, organizations must do three things:

- **Use metrics.** Metrics pinpoint exactly where bias is playing out and establish baselines so you can measure progress.
- **Teach people what bias looks like.** People cannot interrupt bias if they do not know what it looks like.
- **Control bias in business systems.** If metrics show that bias is playing out in workplace systems, the key is to fix those systems.

Organizations that are ready to get started on interrupting bias can check out the [Bias Interrupters Toolkits](#).

Bias Is a Business Issue

Support for DEI goals in the workplace is not new. Beginning in the 1960s and accelerating after 2020, many corporations sought to leverage DEI efforts in response to research that teams with more diversity perform better and that [organizations with more diversity report stronger financial performance](#). In 2023 DEI backlash emerged, causing some organizations to decrease investments and threatening to roll back some of the gains of the past several decades.¹

Bias predicts attrition, which is expensive—often [150% of an employee's annual salary](#). Bias also decreases engagement, and low engagement can [reduce productivity by roughly 20%](#). Finally, bias affects employers' ability to tap the full talent pool by artificially disadvantaging more talented candidates over less talented candidates.

US corporations spent almost [\\$8 billion](#) on bias training in 2020 alone, a number projected to more than double by 2026. If companies are spending this amount of money, they need to be able to assess impact and guide strategy and tactics. However, many of the most common DEI tools, notably bias training, have proven ineffective, according to a [review of the federal data](#) of more than 708 private sector establishments from 1971 to 2002, the most recent data available. Most companies do not currently keep the metrics necessary to assess effectiveness of their current programming.

The successful implementation of Bias Interrupters depends on six key factors

Corporate diversity programs often fail because companies do not use evidence-based ways of eradicating bias in their business systems or track metrics to establish baselines and measure progress. Some overall lessons persist across workstreams:

- 1.** Leadership buy-in ensures that an initiative is seen as important to the organization and can greatly amplify the effectiveness of DEI programs. Organizations should get buy-in from an executive sponsor with the authority to change the business systems. Typically, this is the chief human resources officer (CHRO), chief diversity officer, or both—but may also include the chief talent officer, head of talent acquisition, chief learning officer, or head of employee experience.
- 2.** An email from the executive sponsor is vital to introduce the program, establish its importance, and encourage participation. One organization tripled their survey response rate overnight after one email from their CHRO.
- 3.** Well-designed systems allow businesses to capture metrics specific to the organization. Metrics pinpoint where problems are arising and establish baselines so companies can measure progress. Many companies underinvest in human resources (HR) data analytics, but to avoid expensive retrofits, HR systems need to be designed so that key metrics can be extracted seamlessly.
- 4.** The ability to teach people what bias looks like so that they can brainstorm ways to interrupt bias that work for them ensures employees understand how to address bias in formal processes and informal workplace interactions.
- 5.** A strong internal project manager is essential. The project manager must have the network and the authority to bring in different departments within the organization—as well as the time and bandwidth required to help get buy-in from all project participants, managers, and HR personnel. DEI change management must be defined as part of the project manager's job, not as additional work to be "fit in" on top of their "real job."

- 6. A commitment to take action when bias is found in business systems and monitor its improvement ensures that this change initiative is sustainable. Interrupting bias is an iterative process, so organizations must be prepared to ramp up the Bias Interrupters over time to achieve the maximum impact.

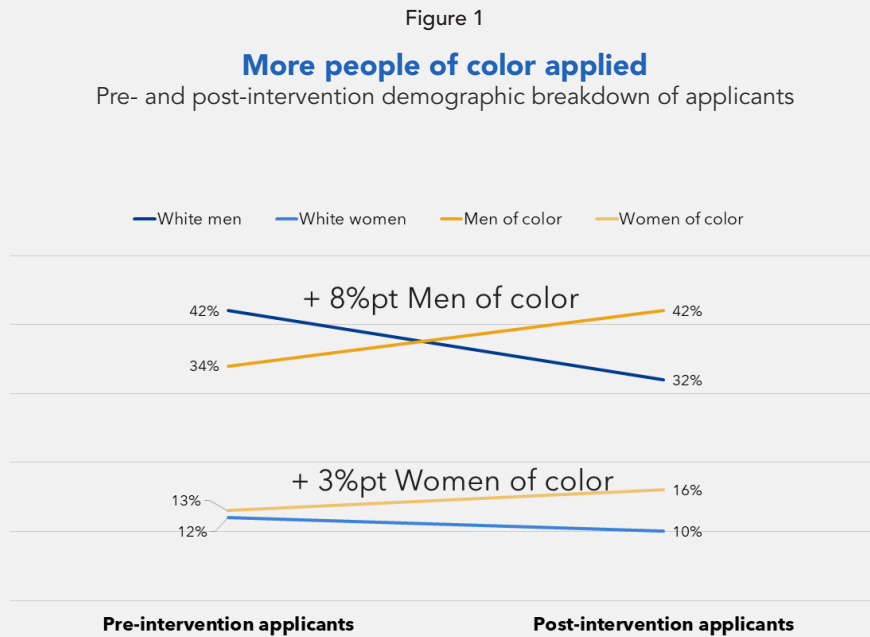
Interrupting bias in hiring enables organizations to hire the most qualified candidates by using evidence to tap the full talent pool

When bias creeps into the hiring and recruitment process, the best candidates can get pushed out. Metrics are crucial to understand whether (and where) certain groups are falling out of the hiring funnel. It is important to keep track of demographics at five stages: 1) who applies to the jobs; 2) who comes in through referrals; 3) who makes it through resume review; 4) who makes it through interviews; and 5) who gets the final offer. It is also important to track any ratings that go along with that data. For more details on the Hiring workstream model and methods, see the Appendix on page 21.

Companies experienced some promising results after a 90-minute workshop on fair and effective hiring in combination with structural and policy changes. The improvements were dramatic over a roughly seven-month period; below are some of the most impactful results:

Diverse application pools lead to diverse offer pools

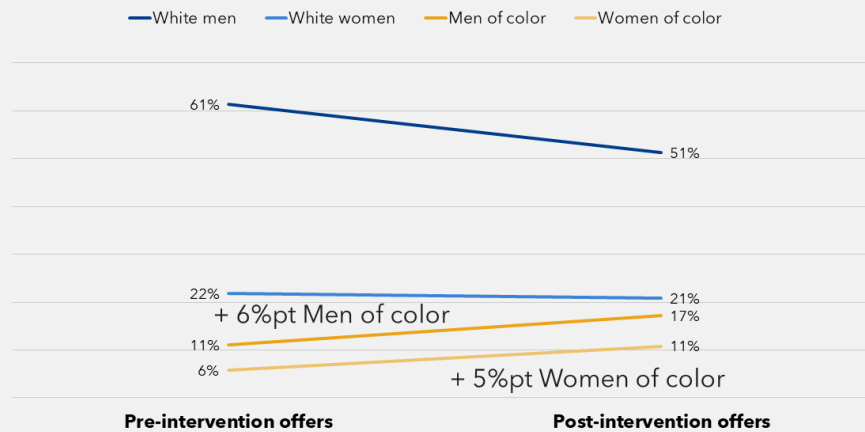
Diversifying the initial pool made a big difference at a manufacturing company. This company initially had an overrepresentation of White men applying; after the intervention, the percentage of men of color applying increased from 34% to 42% and the percentage of women of color increased from 13% to 16% (see Figure 1).



Note: Data from a manufacturing firm
Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work—Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board, 2024.

Increased diversity in the application pool corresponded with a more diverse pool of offers: the share of job offers received by women of color increased from 6% to 11%, while the share of men of color rose from 11% to 17%—an increase of six percentage points in just a few months (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
More people of color received offers
 Pre- and post-intervention demographic breakdown of offers pool



Note: Data from a manufacturing firm
 Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work—Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board, 2024.

While this company made a concentrated effort to recruit from diverse networks, their screening and interview process still needs work. Both pre- and post-intervention, White men continue to be highly advantaged, and White women advantaged, as they moved from applications to offers. Meanwhile, men of color were highly disadvantaged and women of color disadvantaged across the hiring process.

Structured interview processes contain less bias

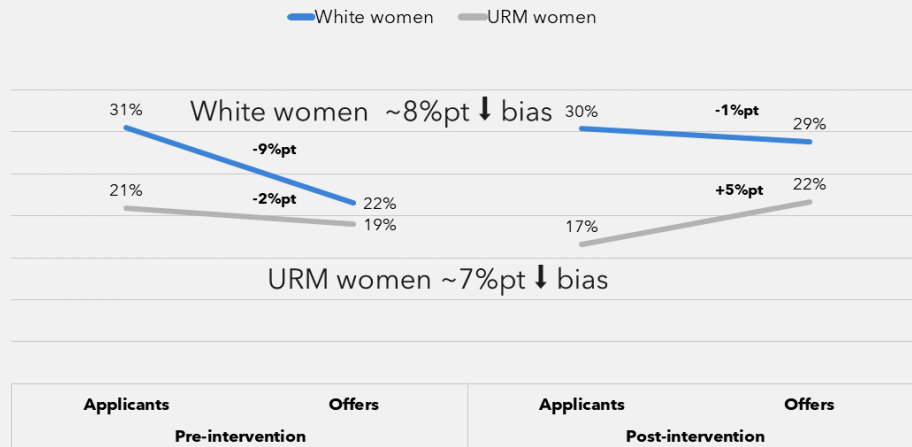
At a tech company, baseline metrics showed that White male candidates were receiving job offers with lower ratings than those of any other demographic group. At the same time, the cutoff below which candidates were rejected was also lower for White men than any other group. This meant the company was not offering jobs to the best candidates, even though they were drawing in a diverse and talented pool.

The company made structural changes to the screening and interview process, and saw dramatically different results post-intervention. White women were eight percentage points more likely to progress through the hiring process; while Black, Latina, and other historically excluded women were seven percentage points more likely to progress. Although the demographic makeup of the candidate pool was similar pre- and post-intervention, there was a marked improvement in the increased ratio of offers for women across the board (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

White and Black, Latina and other historically excluded women were more likely to be hired

Pre- and post-intervention applications and offers for White Women and Black, Latina, and other historically excluded women



Note: Data from a tech company

Note: URM refers to Black, Latino/Latina, and other historically excluded groups

Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work: Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board, 2024

Suggestions for success going forward

Interrupting bias is an iterative process. A combination of training and structure in the hiring process can make a big difference in interrupting bias:

- **Structure is vital.** Organizations that hire “on the fly” without identifying job competencies or standardized rubrics often inadvertently apply different standards to different groups. A common result is that historically excluded groups are held to higher standards and the company does not consistently hire the person with the best skillset for the job. Standardized rubrics also provide the metrics needed to evaluate whether certain groups are consistently receiving lower scores than others.
- **Set clear standards.** Make sure the skills and abilities are clearly defined for new positions. List them in the job ad and create an evaluation rubric to evaluate candidates.
- **Handle referrals fairly.** Referrals can be a great way to draw qualified candidates into your hiring funnel, but sometimes candidates who come in as referrals get a pass on parts of the hiring process. Make sure you have one standardized hiring process that all candidates go through, whether they come in as referrals or apply in other ways.

Interrupting bias in an iterative process. These companies successfully interrupted bias in some aspects of their hiring processes, but bias still needs to be interrupted in other systems in order to promote and retain the best talent. Small, evidence-based tweaks to workplace structures are necessary to make year-on-year progress in performance evaluations, access to opportunities, and informal workplace interactions. This is exactly what other companies did—read on for more results.

Interrupting bias in performance evaluations leads to better-quality, more fair evaluations for all employees

Bias in performance evaluations is pervasive. Fortunately, interrupting it is relatively easy and doing so increases the essential evidence-based feedback that will help your workforce sharpen its skills. For more details on the Performance Evaluations workstream model and methods, see the Appendix.

Companies saw dramatic improvements after the intervention—a 90-minute workshop on fair and effective performance evaluations—in combination with a transition to clear competency criteria in evaluations. Evaluation quality was better and content was more fair for all groups in several ways across all participating organizations; we highlight some of the most impactful results below:

Improvements in evaluation quality

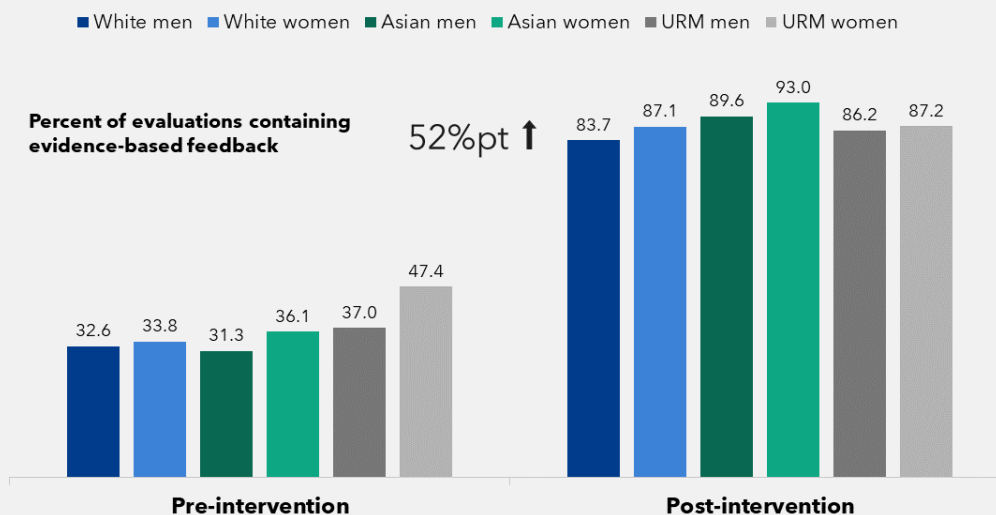
Evidence-based feedback increased across all groups in participating organizations by an average of 44–52 percentage points after the implementation of Bias Interrupters (see examples from two organizations in Figures 4 and 5). Evidence-based feedback focuses on specific behaviors an employee displayed, which means they have more information about how they are meeting key competencies. For example:

"[She executed] a number of different model experiments on behalf of the finance team and when the team gave the feedback that the fulfillment model needed to be batch based...[she] applied her creativity and skillset to find solutions to these challenges," said about an Asian woman at a large retail company.

Figure 4

Evidence-based feedback increased for all groups

Pre- and post-intervention demographic breakdown of evidence-based feedback in evaluations



Note: Data from a consumer goods organization

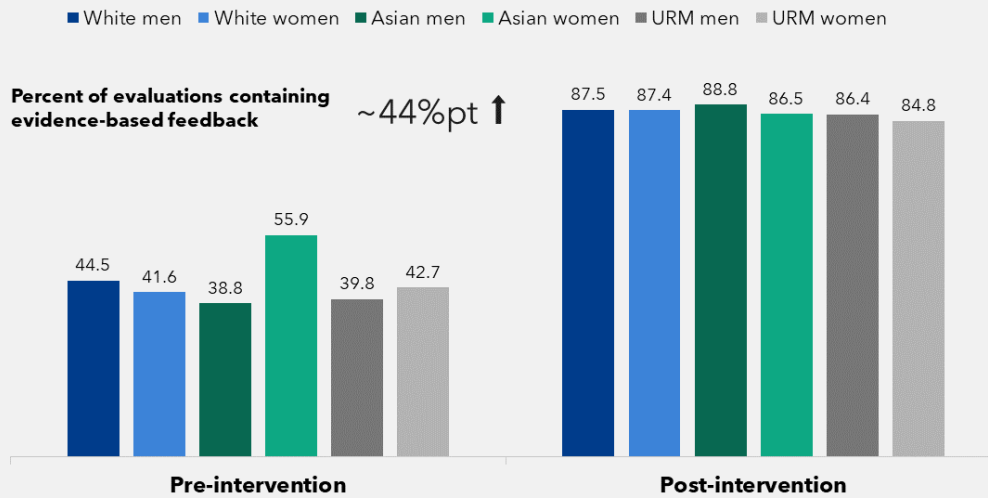
Note: URM refers to Black, Latino/Latina, and other historically excluded groups

Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work—Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board, 2024

Figure 5

Evidence-based feedback increased for all groups

Pre- and post-intervention demographic breakdown of evidence-based feedback in evaluations



Note: Data from a consumer goods organization

Note: URM refers to Black, Latino/Latina, and other historically excluded groups

Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work—Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board, 2024

Action-oriented improvement feedback also increased an average of 11–28 percentage points across all groups in participating organizations. This feedback targets improvement areas the employee should work on over the next year, which is an essential part of skill development.

More fairness in personality comments

Decades of research shows that personality quirks are more readily accepted in White men than in other groups.² The frequency of personality comments decreased for all groups in participating organizations by an average of 18–19 percentage points. The most significant improvement was for White women, who were the most likely to receive personality comments pre-intervention.

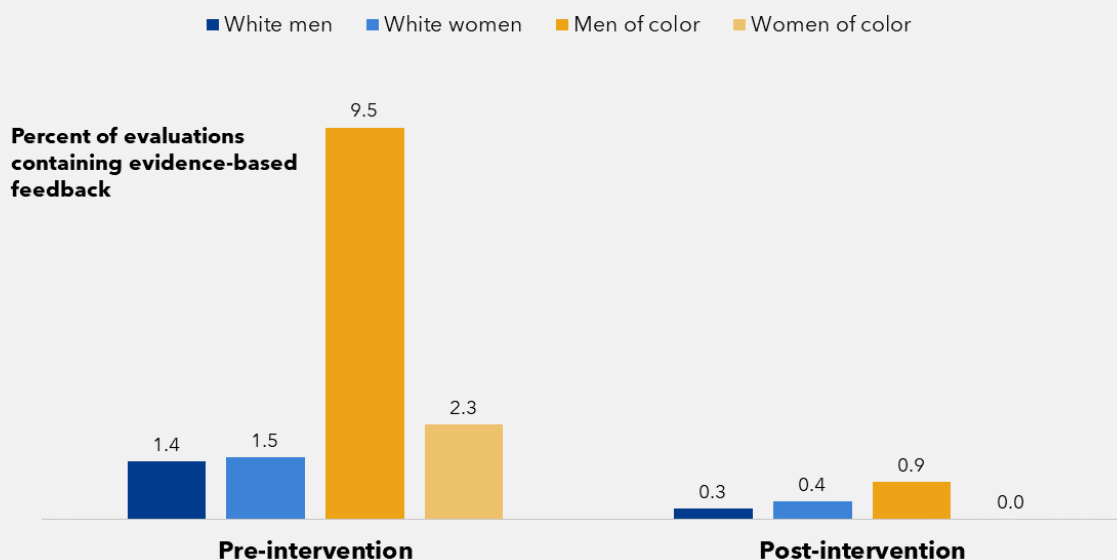
Pre-intervention, a consumer goods organization found a stronger pattern of Tightrope bias than the large retail company: men of color were more likely to have negative traits mentioned than any other group. Post-intervention, the percentage of men of color who had negative personality comments mentioned dropped from 10% to 1% (see Figure 6). For example:

“Sometimes [he] may be too straightforward...his comments or opinion can be viewed as negative,” said about a man of color.

Figure 6

Negative personality comments decreased most for men of color

Pre- and post-intervention demographic breakdown of personality comments in evaluations



Note: Data from a customer goods organization
 Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work—Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board 2024

Suggestions for success going forward

As mentioned earlier, interrupting bias is an iterative process. Although there were consistent, major successes across organizations, a one-year intervention cannot eliminate all bias in performance evaluations. Since the interventions did not focus on access to opportunities, there were likely still disparities in the types of assignments employees of different groups were given. This was evident in the evaluations:

- Leadership:** Pre-intervention, 33–51% of employees in participating organizations had their leadership skills mentioned in their performance evaluations. Comments on leadership went down 10–12 percentage points after the intervention, with 21–43% of employees having their leadership skills brought up. Both pre- and post-intervention, Black, Latina, and other historically excluded women were less likely to have their leadership skills discussed than other groups, which is consistent with research on stereotypes indicating that women of color are less of a fit for leadership positions.³
- Team player:** Pre-intervention, 51–65% of employees in participating organizations were described as good team players, but the patterns varied in different organizations, indicating that stereotypes might be playing a role. After the intervention, there was a 10–12 percentage point decrease overall in these types of comments, although Black, Latino/Latina, and other historically excluded individuals were less likely to be seen as team players than other employees. This may reflect a common pattern documented in EAC’s research where men of color and Black women face pushback for not being good enough team players.⁴

Keeping track of who gets valued assignments levels the playing field to create fair access to career-enhancing work

Interrupting bias in access to opportunities means keeping track of both career-enhancing work and non-promotable office housework:

- Access to high-profile, career-enhancing work is essential for employees to succeed in the workplace.
- Low-profile “office housework” is everything from finding a time to meet, cleaning the cups, being the peacemaker, to doing routine keeping-the-trains running work that does not typically lead to promotion.

For more details on the access to opportunities workstream model and methods, see the Appendix page 21.

Two departments saw some leveling of the playing field with regards to career-enhancing work after a 90-minute workshop on ensuring fair access to opportunities and the creation of a tasking tool to keep track of the allocation of assignments:

Figure 7

Example Tasking Tool

Tasking Tool

Please match up your direct reports with the opportunities they have worked on during the past month by checking the corresponding boxes.

Core Technical Products

	Rachel	Asma	Joan	Raafiya
Novel analyses	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tool development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Research	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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More equitable allocation of career-enhancing work

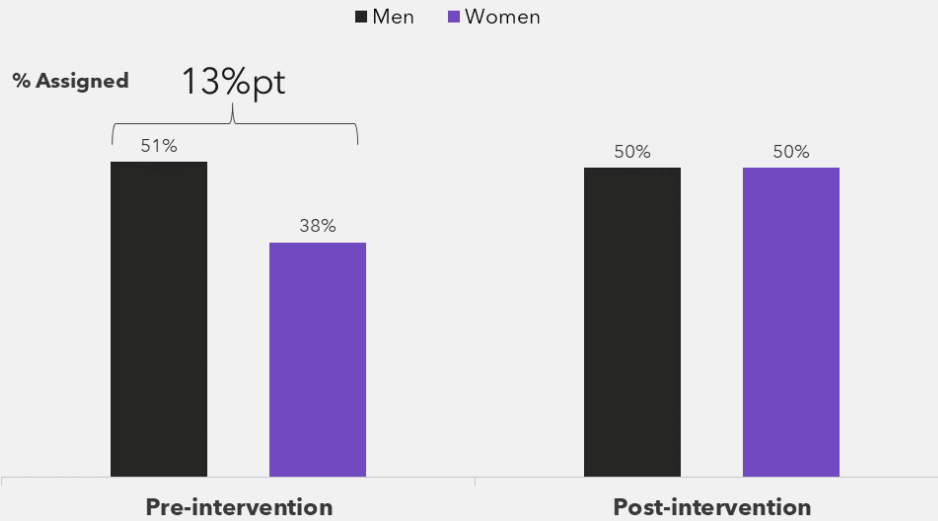
Initially, Departments A and B of an energy company found that women had less access to some types of career-enhancing work. Each department selected action areas of focus where bias was playing out. After the intervention, initial disparities lessened so that the playing field was more level:

- Department A found that managers were giving career-enhancing core technical work to 51% of men but only 38% of women. After the intervention, 50% of both men and women received core technical opportunities.

Figure 8

More equitable allocation of core technical work

Pre- and post-intervention gender breakdown of core technical work allocation



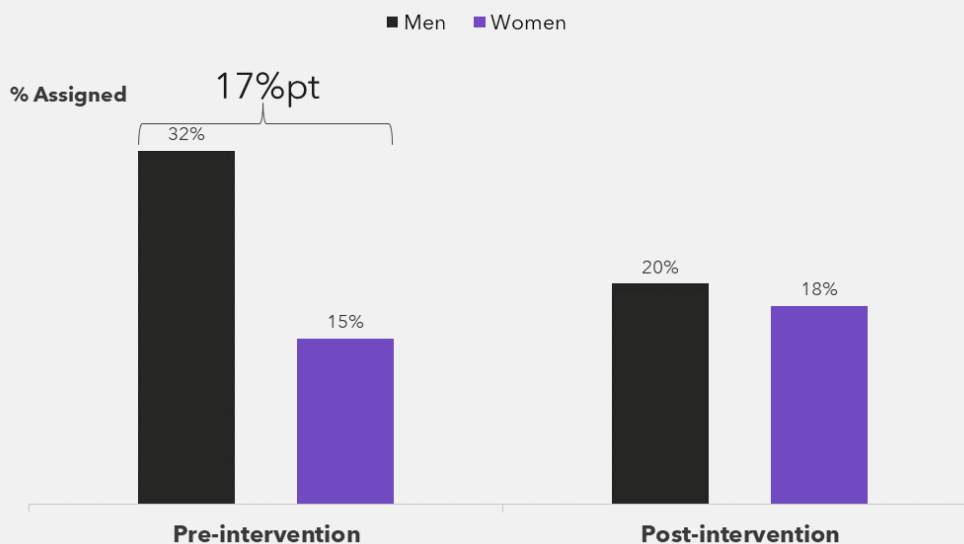
Note: Data from Department A of an energy company
Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work—Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board, 2024

Managers in Department B realized that they were giving high-profile assignments to 32% of men but only 15% of women. Post-intervention, 20% of men and 18% of women were given high-profile assignments, narrowing the gap to only two percentage points.

Figure 9

More equitable allocation of high-profile assignments

Pre- and post-intervention gender breakdown of high-profile assignment allocation



Note: Data from Department B of an energy company
Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work—Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board, 2024

Suggestions for success going forward

Interrupting bias is an iterative process and not every disparity was addressed or solved in the six-month study. In some action areas, there were dramatic changes to the allocation of opportunities post-intervention so that women now received more opportunities than men. This over-correction needs to be addressed in the coming year, since the goal is equal opportunity across groups.

- Both Departments A and B of the energy company noticed that men were initially receiving more opportunities to do externally visible work.
 - Post-intervention, Department A successfully reduced this gap from seven percentage points to two percentage points.
 - Pre-intervention, managers in Department B reported giving tasks with opportunities for external visibility to 44% of men and 26% of women. Post intervention, this pattern flipped: 13% of men and 38% of women got this type of assignment.
 - There are many reasons this could have happened, ranging from a deliberate movement to ensure women had access to externally visible tasks to random variation in task prevalence throughout the year. Additionally, since we collected data for only three months post-intervention, some of this over-correction in the data may be capturing a shift in progress which could stabilize going forward.
- Interrupting bias in access to opportunities involves both equalizing access to high-profile work and leveling the playing field for non-promotable office housework. In Department A, baseline data showed managers allocating administrative tasks to 36% of men and 39% of women. Post-intervention, this number decreased for all employees, but dropped more for women: 35% of men and 20% of women received this work, resulting in a larger disparity than pre-intervention. This may represent a post-intervention effort to shift administrative burdens from women to men.

These examples speak to the need to continually review data and ensure fair allocation of both office housework and high-profile work. Different departments can have very different outcomes, but the ability to track consistent metrics will enable a clear picture of existing issues and the path forward to address them.

As many organizations do not track the metrics around access to opportunities, organizations will need to build a simple spreadsheet to capture metrics.

Well-designed bias training helps reduce bias in everyday workplace interactions

After EAC's Individual Bias Interrupters (IBI) 90-minute workshop, participating companies saw sharp decreases in some—but not all—types of bias. For more details on the informal workplace interactions workstream model and methods, see the Appendix.

Why didn't the results look the same across organizations? Patterns of bias reduction varied across companies, depending on several common derailers such as a lack of leadership buy-in or instability, detailed on page 18. There was a consistent pattern across all organizations: each company began by examining their pre-intervention data and selecting action areas of focus; these areas tended to show improvements and are highlighted below.

Why are certain groups highlighted? Pre-intervention, women of color consistently reported the highest levels of bias, with White men reporting the lowest levels; White women and men of color tended to fall in between. Since the disparities were largest between women of color and White men, this is also where we saw the largest improvements. We also noted meaningful changes for White women and men of color.

Below we highlight some of the key improvements in bias patterns and business systems:

Patterns of bias

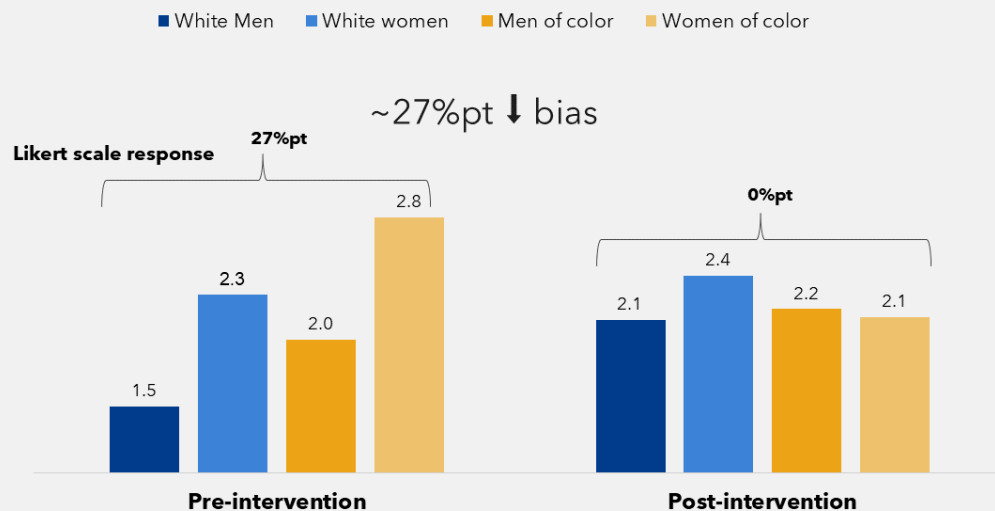
All companies saw more equality in the office housework load post-workshop: disparities between White men and women of color dropped by as much as seven to 27 percentage points across organizations.

Notably, at a professional services firm, the disparity between White men and women of color fell from 27 percentage points to zero with respect to who did literal office housework like planning parties and clean-up (see Figure 10). The disparity between White men and White women dropped by nine percentage points and men of color by eight percentage points.

Figure 10

Reduction in disparity in office housework between White men and women of color

Pre- and post-intervention demographic breakdown of responses to, "I more often do tasks such as planning parties, cleaning up after a meeting, or ordering food, as compared to my colleagues in comparable roles and seniority."



Note: Data from a professional services firm

Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work—Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board, 2024

Prove-It-Again Bias

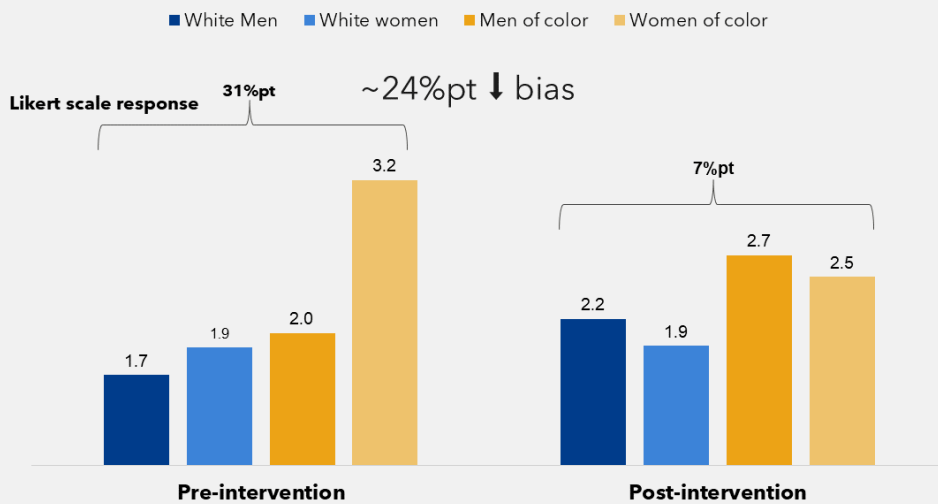
Before implementing Bias Interrupters, data from all participating companies showed that women of color were assumed to be less competent and were required to prove their expertise repeatedly.

After the intervention, the disparity in Prove-It-Again bias between White men and women of color decreased by as much as 10 to 24 percentage points in three out of four companies. Each company improved on different aspects of the Prove-It-Again bias pattern (see Figures 11, 12, and 13).

Examples of reduction in disparity in Prove-It-Again bias between White men and women of color

Figure 11

Pre- and post-intervention demographic breakdown of responses to, “I get less respect than my colleagues for the same level and quality of work.”

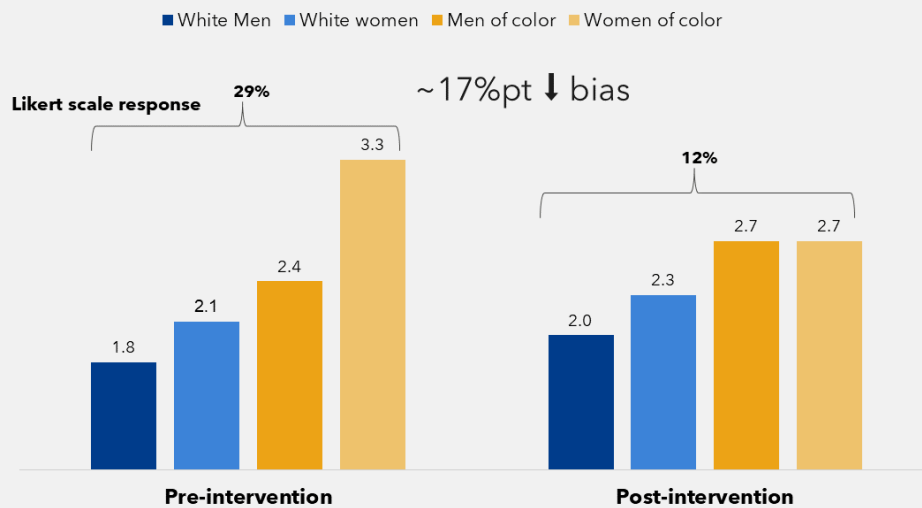


Note: Data from a professional services firm

Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work—Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board, 2024

Figure 12

Pre- and post-intervention demographic breakdown of responses to, “When I give an outstanding performance, people seem surprised.”

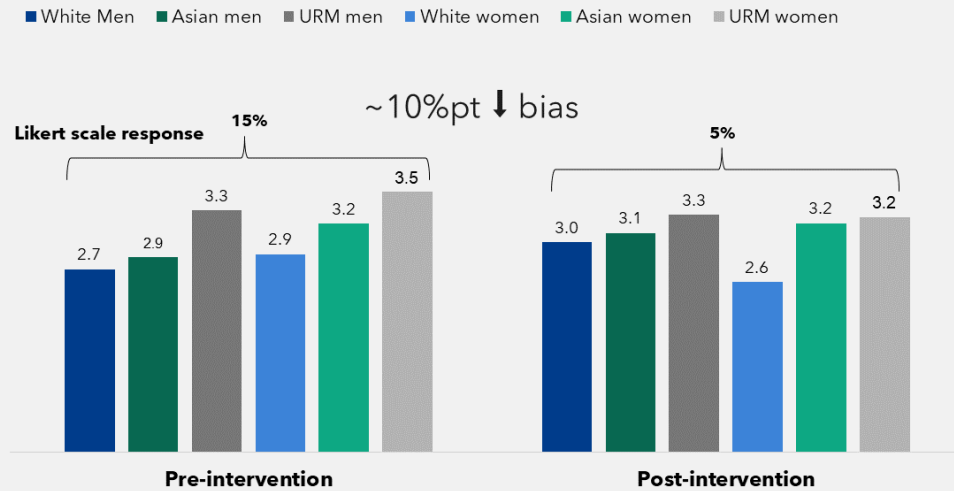


Note: Data from an energy company

Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work—Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board, 2024

Figure 13

Pre- and post-intervention demographic breakdown of responses to, “I have to prove myself repeatedly to get the same recognition as my colleagues.”



Note: Data from a financial institution

Note: URM refers to Black, Latino/Latina, and other historically excluded groups

Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work—Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board, 2024

Tightrope Bias

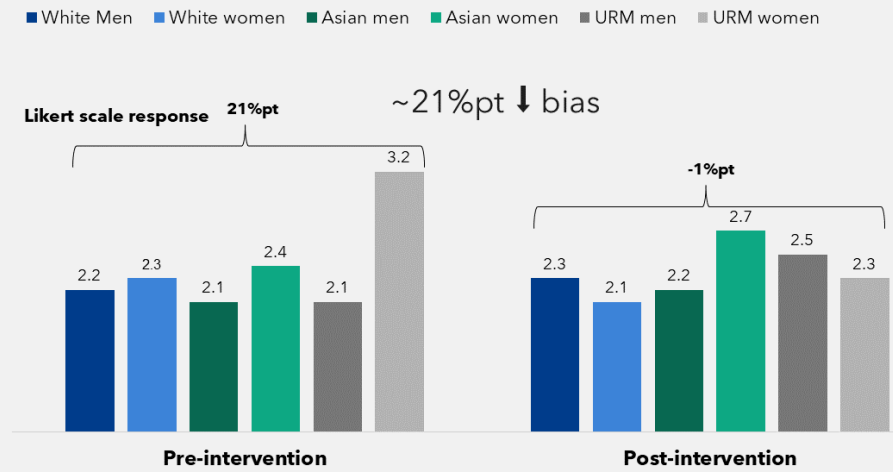
Across all companies, women of color reported a reduction in personality comments from pre- to post-intervention. At one professional services firm, the disparity in personality comments between White men and women of color dropped by 18 percentage points, and by nine percentage points for White women.

The disparity between White men and women of color in Tightrope bias linked to stereotypes about being a good team player in the workplace decreased by as much as 11–21 percentage points in two out of four companies. For example, at one financial institution there was 21 percentage point reduction in the disparity between White men and Black, Latina, and other historically excluded women on the question of whether the respondent had to work harder to be seen as a team player (see Figure 14).

Figure 14

Reduction in disparity in Tightrope bias between White men and Black, Latina, and other historically excluded women

Pre- and post-intervention demographic breakdown of responses to, "I have to work harder to be seen as a team player."



Note: Data from a financial institution

Note: URM refers to Black, Latino/Latina, and other historically excluded groups

Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work—Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board, 2024

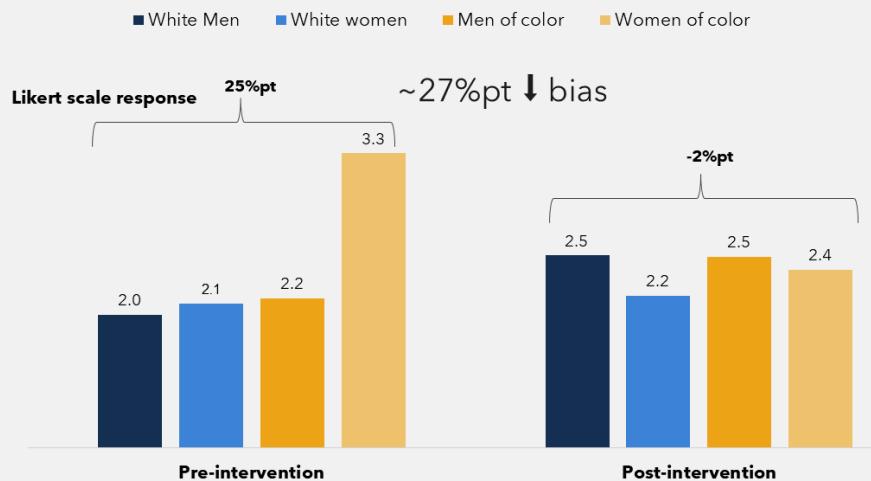
Distinct racial experiences that differ by group

All groups of women, but particularly women of color, often have their expertise questioned. At one professional services firm, there was a 27 percentage point reduction in women of color's expertise being questioned compared to White men's (see Figure 15).

Figure 15

Reduction in disparity in expertise being questioned between White men and women of color

Pre- and post-intervention demographic breakdown of responses to, "Even though I am the expert, questions are often addressed to someone else on my team."



Note: Data from a professional services firm

Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work—Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board, 2024

Suggestions for success going forward

Bias workshops can be impactful, but they cannot interrupt bias that is built into business systems. At all four companies, women of color were less likely to report fair hiring, performance evaluations, access to high-profile work, and compensation. As expected, the IBI produced no improvement in these systems, all of which require structural interventions. Organizations can accomplish that by building Bias Interrupters into workplace systems and by giving bias workshops consistently (though not necessarily every year).

Organizations must avoid common derailers when implementing DEI programs

HR professionals at organizations usually already know what needs to be fixed but they can run into challenges without the tools to implement the fixes. The Bias Interrupters approach has great potential when the HR team has the support it needs, but it can fail when these conditions are not met.

Both in our work with the eleven organizations who joined us to host experiments and in EAC's prior experiences in working with companies, we have identified five common derailleurs that can impede progress towards DEI goals:

- 1. Lack of leadership buy-in means roadblocks will pop up.**
 - Failing to get buy-in from all of the necessary parties—which can include not only the CEO but also the chief diversity officer, CHRO, legal team and possibly others such as the chief learning officer—means that DEI initiatives cannot get off the ground and begin in the first place.
 - Changes in leadership can result in withdrawal of support from the top.
 - Tensions within the leadership team can make it impossible to give a consistent message that the bias-interruption effort is important.
- 2. Business conditions will impact progress toward goals unless organizations take careful action.**
 - Turmoil or instability in the business can put DEI on the back burner.
 - Mergers and acquisitions can lead to layoffs, demotions, etc., that negatively impact a specific demographic group. Internal organizational changes can do the same.
 - Hiring freezes can make it difficult to see results of hiring interventions.
- 3. Ineffective design of DEI workshops can undercut results. In the delivery of workshops, we found several factors are critical to success:**
 - Link the intervention/workshop to the business imperative to recruit, retain, and advance the best talent.
 - Describe how bias plays out in everyday workplace interactions (not the cognitive bases of bias or a 10,000-foot look at structural racism/sexism, which can result in the opposite of the desired impact).
 - Give the evidence that bias exists, preferably data from the company or the specific industry.
 - Use examples tailored to the specific industry.

- Participants need to walk away with concrete ways of interrupting bias they will actually use going forward. The best way to achieve this is with breakout groups where people brainstorm ways of interrupting bias that they would feel comfortable using.
 - Structure breakout sessions with six people in each group and leave people wanting more by limiting breakouts to five to six minutes.
4. Not building key functionalities into data management systems makes it impossible or costly to keep track of different groups' experiences, for example, when performance evaluation data cannot easily be synced with demographic data, or when it is impossible to provide demographic breakdowns at each stage of the hiring funnel (e.g., initial pool, resume review, interviews, offers).
5. Not considering the sustainability of initiatives means successes will be short-lived.
- When companies try to take on too much at once, often they achieve nothing concrete.
 - When companies do not keep metrics to establish baselines and measure progress, they do not know if they are moving towards their goals.
 - Bias is primed all the time; Bias Interrupters need to be built into normal business processes so that bias is interrupted all the time as well.
 - Interrupting bias in one business system does not preclude the need to systematically interrupt it in all others, as business system outcomes are often interlinked. For example, fixing hiring issues without addressing equal access to high-profile opportunities might mean that you get the best talent in the door but are unable to retain them long term.

Conclusion

Addressing bias in the workplace can seem (and often is) a daunting task. In this study, we aimed to provide a clear and simple blueprint to making lasting change by treating bias in the workplace like any other business challenge: analyze the data, understand the problem and its causes, plan interventions and course corrections, assess the results and analyze progress. The Bias Interrupters framework provides one possible blueprint for those who want to lead their organizations in this effort to create the fair and inclusive cultures workers deserve that, in turn, drives business impact.

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Further Reading

[How CEOs and CHROs Can Navigate DEI Backlash](#)

[Data-Driven Diversity](#)

[For Women and Minorities to Get Ahead, Managers Must Assign Work Fairly](#)

[Hacking Tech's Diversity Problem](#)

[How Calibration Meetings Introduce Bias into Performance Reviews](#)

[How One Company Worked to Root Out Bias from Performance Reviews](#)

[How the Best Bosses Interrupt Bias on Their Teams](#)

[The Five Biases Pushing Women Out of STEM](#)

[The Rising Importance of the Chief Diversity Officer](#)

[The ROI of Inclusion: How to Align DEI and Business Results](#)

[The Time Is Now for Enhanced DEI Business Metrics](#)

[To Build a DEI Program That Works, You Need Metrics](#)

[Update Your DE&I Playbook](#)

[Why Corporate Diversity Programs Fail—and How Small Tweaks Can Have Big Impact.](#)

Appendix

Study methodology

Beginning in 2022, EAC guided seven human capital organizations through the Bias Interrupters framework to create more equitable business systems. Each organization elected to participate in one or more of these four workstreams:

- Interrupting bias in hiring and recruitment
- Interrupting bias in performance evaluations
- Interrupting bias in access to opportunities
- Interrupting bias in informal workplace interactions

Each of these workstreams offered chief diversity officers and CHROs and their teams the chance to work directly with Joan C. Williams and the EAC team to conduct pre/post intervention data analysis to determine business impact.

Our results, showcased in this report, found that many companies achieved positive results and are poised to make steady, year-on-year progress toward achieving DEI goals. Our results also show that some companies did not make significant progress or even took a step backward on some metrics; several factors were at play. For example, one company had a change in leadership and lost the champion for the intervention, another underwent a merger, and another chose not to deliver the Bias Interrupters workshop as designed and instead substituted a different approach. These common derailers can temporarily delay progress towards DEI goals, but it is possible to get back on track; creating lasting impact and driving change is an iterative process. Continual monitoring of progress and examining the effectiveness of interventions and making course corrections when necessary is critical to long-term success.

Due to the sensitivities surrounding DEI and human subjects research guidelines, we have chosen not to provide specific, identifiable information about why interventions did or did not work in individual companies. As part of this work, all company data was anonymized before sharing with the EAC researchers. Companies who want to use their own data to perform similar analyses must follow all data privacy protocols they typically use. For more information on how to build best-practice data-driven DEI initiatives while controlling for legal risk, [read this white paper](#).

Hiring workstream additional findings

An energy company started out with a diverse pool of candidates, a trend that continued throughout the hiring process. This company offers critical insights on the role of ratings: their ranking system allowed them to check whether any groups were getting an unfair advantage as they moved through the funnel. Both pre- and post-intervention, this company was steadily giving offers to candidates with the best ratings and this was consistent across groups.

Not all companies were successful

Two other companies participated in the workstream but ran into some of the common derailers listed on page 18. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these companies saw similar patterns in their hiring funnel data pre- and post-intervention. However, they are still a step ahead of where they were before: each company now has a detailed understanding of the most impactful actions they can take to level the playing field for all candidates.

Performance evaluations workstream methodology

Two organizations participated in the performance evaluations workstream: a consumer goods organization and a large retail company. From pre- to post-intervention, the average time for a company to complete this workstream was just over one year.



Procedure

Use metrics. Anonymized performance evaluation data were linked with the demographic data of each employee and the narrative elements of performance evaluations were coded on a variety of elements of feedback (for example, personality feedback). Each evaluation received a yes or no code for each element, and the percentages of evaluations containing each element were calculated for each demographic group and for the company as a whole.

Teach what bias looks like. Each company delivered EAC's 90-minute Fair and Effective Performance Evaluations Workshop to managers and evaluators.

Control bias in business systems. Each company was transitioning to a new performance management system that provided managers with clear competency definitions on which to rate employees.

Assess the effect. After the next performance evaluations cycle, data were re-assessed to examine whether the elements of feedback were present.

Access to opportunities workstream methodology

Two departments of an energy company participated in the access to opportunities workstream. From pre- to post-intervention, the time for the company to complete the workstream was six months.



Procedure

Use metrics. The EAC team started by creating a typology of opportunities to define high- and low-profile work. Next, we created a Tasking Tool to capture how managers were allocating opportunities. Our analyses focused on who got each type of opportunity at least once, broken down by gender given the small sample size.

Teach what bias looks like. The company delivered EAC's 90-minute Ensuring Fair Access to Opportunities Workshop for managers to learn how bias affects work assignments and to learn new strategies to allocate opportunities to a wider group.

Assess the effect. We evaluated Tasking Tool data post-intervention to assess whether opportunities were allocated more equitably by calculating and comparing the percentages of men and women who received each type of opportunity pre- and post-intervention.

Informal workplace interactions workstream methodology

Four organizations participated in the informal workplace interactions workstream: a professional services company, two financial institutions, and an energy company. From pre- to post-intervention, the average time for companies to complete the workstream was four months.



Procedure

Use metrics. Each company administered EAC’s 10-minute climate survey, the Workplace Experiences Survey (WES), to provide a baseline. The WES pinpoints every basic pattern of bias based on race, gender, and class origin, precisely where bias is playing out (e.g., promotions.), and how it is affecting outcome measures such as belonging and intent to stay.

Teach what bias looks like. Each company gave EAC’s 90-minute interactive Individual Bias Interrupters Workshop.

Assess the effect. Each company administered the WES a second time three months after the training to assess whether the workshop was effective.

Additional findings on informal workplace interactions

Maternal Wall bias

No companies saw consistent reductions in Maternal Wall bias (bias based on motherhood) after the intervention. Maternal Wall bias is strongly linked to organizational parental leave policies, so companies hoping to reduce this type of bias should [consider whether their policies could be improved](#).

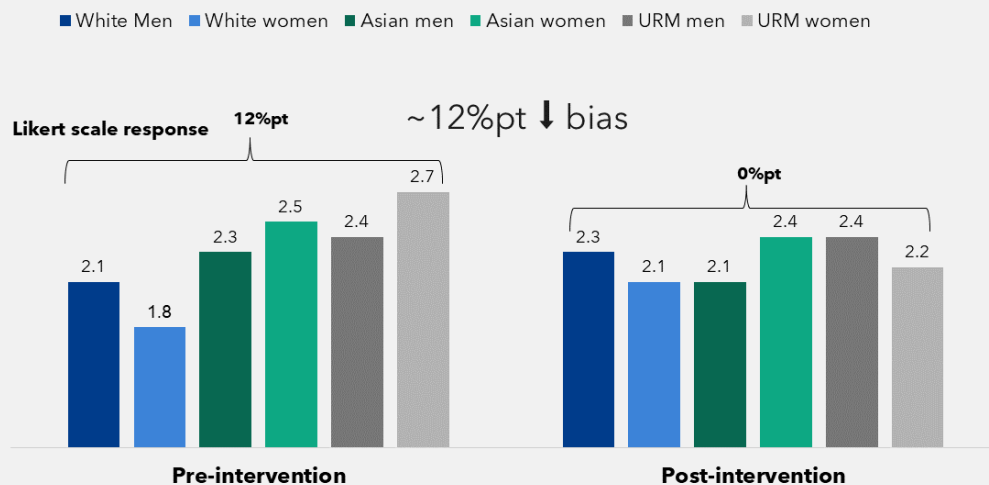
Tug of War bias

Two out of four companies saw post-intervention reductions in Tug of War bias, where bias against a group fuels conflict within the group. The disparity between White men and women of color dropped as much as 10–12 percentage points.

Reduction in disparity in Tug of War bias between White men and Black, Latina, and other historically excluded women

Figure 16

Pre- and post-intervention demographic breakdown of responses to, “I worry that it will be construed as favoritism if I support others from my race/gender for professional opportunities.”



Note: Data from a financial institution

Note: URM refers to Black, Latino/Latina, and other historically excluded groups

Source: *Traditional Bias Training Doesn't Work—Bias Interrupters Do*, EAC and The Conference Board, 2024

Distinct racial experiences differ by group

- EAC's research consistently finds that Black employees report higher levels of disrespect than other groups.⁵ At a professional services company, women of color after the workshop reported this bias at a rate 15 percentage points lower.
- At a financial institution, there was a reduction in bias based on assumptions about English language skills: women of color were 11 percentage points less likely to say that people were surprised by their English skills post-intervention.

Acting on data led to a reduction of unfair mentorship expectations

Women of color are often expected to provide extra uncompensated mentorship to people of their own ethnicity or race.⁶ After receiving feedback on how bias was impacting employees in the pre-intervention survey, two financial organizations put into place mentoring programs. This resulted in the burden of extra mentorship expectations being reduced for women of color: the disparity with White men decreased by 21 percentage points for Black, Latina, and other historically excluded women; and eight points for Asian women at one organization and nine points for women of color at another.

Hiring workstream methodology

Five organizations participated in the hiring workstream: an energy company, a financial institution, a manufacturing company, a medical tech company, and a tech start-up. While timeframes from pre- to post-intervention points varied, the average time for a company to complete the process was approximately seven months.



Procedure

Use metrics. Anonymized hiring funnel data from applicant tracking systems (ATS) were linked with candidate demographic data collected with Equal Employment Opportunity Commission questions. EAC analyzed the demographic makeup of the candidate pool across the different stages of the hiring process (for example, the applicant pool, the interview pool, and the offers pool). At two companies, candidate rating data from the applications process were also evaluated by calculating and comparing averages across demographic groups.

Teach what bias looks like. Each company delivered EAC's 90-minute Fair and Effective Hiring Workshop for those involved in the hiring process.

Control bias in business systems. Companies worked to add more structure into their hiring processes, for example, by developing rubrics to rate each candidate competency by competency.

Assess the effect. Changes in the makeup of the pool were evaluated pre- and post-intervention, as were how the percentages of groups increased or decreased as they moved through the hiring funnel.

Endnotes

- 1 Rita Meyerson, Diana Scott, and Allan Schweyer, *How CEOs and CHROs Can Navigate DEI Backlash*, The Conference Board, February 2024.
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