

RESEARCH IN ACTION:

Wharton's [Katy Milkman](#) Studies Whether Online Diversity Training Works

THE PROBLEM:

Businesses and organizations across the country invest millions of dollars in online diversity training programs designed to reduce bias and discrimination, but Wharton operations, information and decisions professor [Katy Milkman](#) thinks they should probably spend their money elsewhere. She was part of a team of Penn researchers who conducted a large-scale study into the effectiveness of such programs and found they have disappointing results, producing only limited changes in employees' attitudes and almost no changes in their behaviors. "Stop wasting your money," Milkman said. "These programs are widely used. It's a huge industry, and I suspect it's generally a waste of people's time and money in light of the evidence. Because if it's not changing behavior, I don't think it's a great investment." An hour or two of online diversity training may heighten someone's awareness about stereotypes and implicit bias, but it does little to eradicate beliefs that are deeply ingrained, the professor said. Still, companies continue to use these programs because they want to do something to address discrimination. "It's a public statement; it conveys organizational values; it's bite-sized; it's schedulable. But it doesn't seem to work," Milkman said.



THE RESEARCH:

In their published study, "[The Mixed Effects of Online Diversity Training](#)," Milkman and her colleagues partnered with a large global company to test the impact of online diversity training in an experiment with over 3,000 employees. Employees were divided randomly into three groups to complete an hour-long training program on either gender bias, gender and racial bias, or safety and active listening (the control group). While the results showed a significant positive change in attitudes toward women in the workplace, the program had negligible effects on inclusive workplace behaviors.

The programs did prompt more women in the U.S. to seek senior female mentors, and there were similar but weaker patterns among underrepresented minorities. That's a positive benefit; however, Milkman said the training was supposed to persuade managers to reach out to underrepresented employees. "Now, it's putting the burden on women and minorities, and that's the last thing we want to do. That's the opposite of what diversity training is supposed to do."

THE SOLUTION:

Milkman wants businesses to stop investing in short, online diversity training programs and start using science- and evidence-based solutions to make structural changes in decision-making and procedures. "We have evidence that these things matter," Milkman said. She offered three examples of restructuring that can help prevent bias from emerging or influencing decision outcomes. They include:

1. Implementing blind hiring

to block out candidates' personal information such as race and gender.

2. Creating a promotion pool of all qualified candidates

rather than asking employees to nominate themselves, because research shows that women and minorities are less likely to self-nominate.

3. Conducting an audit of all non-promotable tasks

like who organizes the office holiday party or takes notes during meetings, to ensure these tasks are equally and fairly distributed.



THE SCHOLAR: KATY MILKMAN

Katy Milkman is a multidisciplinary scholar and author whose first book, *[How to Change: The Science of Getting Where You Are to Where You Want to Be](#)*, was a Wall Street Journal bestseller. She holds a secondary appointment at the Perelman School of Medicine, and she co-founded and co-directs the [Behavior Change for Good Initiative](#).

Milkman first became interested in issues of gender and race when she was earning her bachelor's degree in operations research and financial engineering at Princeton, where she realized the majority of her classmates were men and underrepresented minorities were scarce. She noticed an even more troubling lack of diversity among her doctoral classmates at Harvard, where she earned a Ph.D. in information technology and management. "I started to realize this is a very clear and present issue that I somehow overlooked growing up in a little utopian bubble," she said. "The further you climb, the worse it gets."

As a behavioral scientist, Milkman focuses her work on effecting change and said she's most inspired by her students, who are committed to social, racial, and gender justice. "I'm really motivated by these incredible students who are trying to make the world a better place by bringing their own diverse backgrounds and insights to these problems."

The Wharton Coalition for Equity and Opportunity (CEO) creates research-driven solutions to help current and future leaders ensure equity in business relationships and leadership. Dean Erika James, who is Wharton's first Black and first female dean, is emblematic of a paradigm shift in executive leadership. She has launched the Wharton Coalition for Equity and Opportunity as the hallmark of her leadership commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The initiative is being led by Kenneth L. Shropshire, Wharton emeritus professor of legal studies and business ethics. Shropshire is the former director of the Wharton Sports Business Initiative and former CEO of the Global Sport Institute.