Unconscious Bias
Women in the Hybrid Tech Workplace

BY RHONDA DIBACHI

In the technology industry, unconscious gender bias has been and continues to be an unspoken, persistent issue.

This article focuses on how hybrid work models can be leveraged by women in tech today to mitigate these biases, based on my own observations and research. With the generational changes in the perception of women in tech, confronting these biases head-on can be counterproductive and relying on company edicts is naive, especially in environments where such issues are not openly acknowledged. The tech workspace is notorious for just such an environment.

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN THE TECH WORKFORCE

In the tech industry, a persistent undercurrent of conscious and unconscious gender bias has long been a problem. It used to be overt, but in the face of increased workplace regulations to protect women, it has gone underground in the last several decades. This is a subtle bias, affecting opportunities and advancement for women in a field traditionally dominated by men. Hybrid work models, which have been introduced since the pandemic, are a significant shift in workplace dynamics. This new work model can be used by women in tech to improve their work experience, gain better career advancement opportunities, and reduce the hazardous effects of unconscious gender bias. It seems the perfect juncture, providing flexibility to women while allowing them to fully participate in the work environment. The hybrid model can give women in tech a potential new tool to minimize the triggers their presence can sometimes cause. But it also brings new opportunities for gender bias to harm a woman's career.

My insights into this issue stem from a career spanning decades in tech, where I have experienced firsthand both the blunt-force trauma of overt misogyny in the workplace as well as the subtle oppression of unconscious bias. As a young woman working at a nuclear power plant in Limerick, Pa., I saw and experienced gender bias. It was blatantly obvious. As the sole woman engineer among dozens, I often heard men questioning the intellectual capabilities of women in engineering. This overt skepticism about women's place in tech persisted well into the 1990s, with debates in tech magazines openly questioning whether women even "belong" in IT or computer science. Over the years, there has been a slow yet perceptible shift in these perceptions. The blatant bias of earlier decades has morphed into the more subtle discrimination of unconscious bias.

HYBRID WORK: THE POSITIVE ASPECTS

Hybrid work models can be beneficial for women in tech. This model offers a level of flexibility that works well for women, who often juggle multiple roles both professionally and personally. It allows for a more balanced approach to managing work-life commitments. In my years of managing diverse teams, I have consistently found women who are mothers, especially those with at-home children, to be among the most diligent and efficient workers on my team. Their ability to organize, focus, and optimize their time is unparalleled. They are the epitome of no-nonsense professionalism, bringing a level of dedication and efficiency to the job that others often lack. Hybrid work amplifies these strengths by providing them the flexibility to excel in both their professional and personal lives.

INCREASED GENDER-NEUTRAL VISIBILITY THROUGH VIRTUAL PLATFORMS

In a hybrid work environment, interactions are warped and filtered, particularly in how we perceive and engage with others. Virtual platforms level the playing field in some respects. For instance, in videoconferences, physical attributes such as height or stature, which might subconsciously influence perceptions in an in-person setting, become less pronounced. Everyone, regardless of their

physical presence, occupies the same amount of screen space.

This feature can be at least equalizing, and at best empowering, especially for women. It minimizes the traditional, often gendered dynamics of a physical meeting. The tall, imposing figure no longer dominates the room, and the quieter voices can contribute. Virtual interactions can filter the personality or gender of an individual, reducing the "femaleness" or "maleness" of a person, which, in a biased environment, can sometimes work to a woman's advantage, allowing her work and ideas to take center stage.

A video representation of a woman is also less triggering to some. A woman's face on the screen is less "female" than one in person. There is no perfume or lotion to smell. Clothing cues are minimized. Even high-definition video flattens a face and makes it more neutral. For women in the tech workplace, a videoconference can be used to overcome colleagues' strong unconscious gender biases.

HYBRID WORK AS A TOOL FOR MENTORSHIP

Hybrid work environments can also be useful to a woman in tech in the area of mentorship. It is not just former U.S. Vice President Mike Pence who is needlessly prudish when dealing with women in social-adjacent engagements. Some senior men hesitate to initiate a mentoring relationship with a younger woman. This misguided fastidiousness can be mitigated in a virtual setting. Videoconferencing and other remote communication tools offer a less public, more controlled, and blameless environment for mentorship. Mentorship can be highly effective in career advancement, and the hybrid work environment offers opportunities to attract mentors that otherwise would be unwilling to expose themselves to others' biases.

The flexibility of hybrid work can be useful for pregnant women or new mothers. It allows them to maintain their professional visibility

and involvement without inadvertently triggering a bias due to a pregnancy's visible manifestations.

OBJECTIVE PERFORMANCE METRICS IN HYBRID WORK

A hybrid environment can work in a tech woman's favor by changing the way productivity is measured. In a traditional tech work environment, performance metrics are influenced by many factors besides pure output. Many of these factors, including time spent in the office or time talking about video games, have nothing to do with performance. Hybrid work, with less face time, pushes the focus toward more objective metrics based on output and results. It forces managers to rely on results, first and foremost. This shift can be a significant equalizer in mitigating unconscious gender bias. When the emphasis is on the quality and impact of work rather than on physical presence or subjective perceptions, it levels the playing field. This works in a woman's favor in the tech workplace, where results are typically less subjective than in a non-tech workplace. Marketing or media performance, for example, are based on more subjective results, such as perceived creativity.
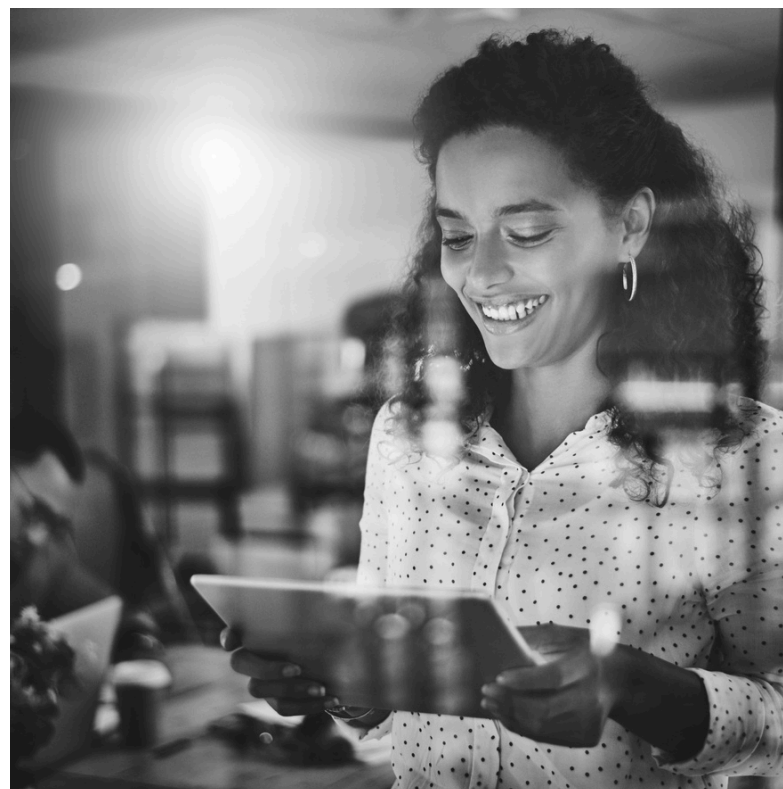
THE CHALLENGES OF HYBRID WORKING

Hybrid work comes with many opportunities, such as flexibility, gender-neutral visibility, increased mentorship opportunities, and objective performance metrics.

It also brings up significant new issues, particularly when it comes to collaboration and synching up with team members. According to a March 2023 article from Gallup ("How to Make Hybrid Work for Women"), while hybrid work can boost individual productivity, it may lead to decreased collaboration and coordination challenges within teams. This leads to hybrid workers enjoying fewer career advancement opportunities. That, along with the unconscious gender bias prevalent in tech workplaces, can severely limit a woman tech worker's career.

A study from Qualtrics and the Boardlist in August 2020 ("Not in the Same Boat: Career Progression in the Pandemic") noted that 34% of men working remotely with children at home received a promotion, compared with just 9% of women in the same situation. The same study found that, among remote workers, men received a pay increase twice as often as women, at a rate of 26% compared with 13%. This disparity is exacerbated by the existing unconscious gender biases in the tech industry.

Hybrid work's challenges are the other side of the coin to opportunities. Increased flexibility leads to less cohesion within the group, resulting in decreased career advancement. This is exacerbated if the employee is a woman.

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF HYBRID WORK

Women in tech can use these facts about hybrid work to intelligently select the best work mode for doing a particular task or interacting with a particular colleague. Balancing tasks between remote and onsite work can improve the outcome of each. On

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in-office days, women should work on tasks that maximize face-to-face interactions and build strong networks with supportive colleagues, while minimizing interactions with colleagues who have strong unconscious biases.

Performance reviews, critical meetings, and high-stakes presentations should be handled in person to ensure that their contributions are fully recognized and accurately attributed. Negative results can be refuted more efficiently in person. Allies can be more easily recruited. Conversely, remote workdays are perfect for tasks requiring deep concentration, solo research, or administrative duties. They are also perfect for interactions with biased colleagues because a screen representation can be less triggering and minimize nonverbal messaging. This dual approach gives women in tech another tool to manage and grow a strong professional presence while reducing their exposure to potential bias in day-to-day interactions. They can use the new hybrid work model to turn off triggering mechanisms through remote work and videoconferencing. The emphasis on objective performance metrics in a hybrid environment can help level the playing field, putting the focus on results opposed to other unrelated metrics. The flexibility of hybrid work and the focus on objective results can present a woman's contribution in a stronger light.

I have not talked about management training, networking, or self-care. These are important, but I believe handling unconscious gender bias in the tech industry requires more than just waiting for organizational policies to come in and save the day. Women in tech should view hybrid work environments as a powerful tool to take charge of their own careers. The hybrid work model can showcase their competence and prepare them for greater challenges.

I am proud of the new generation of women in tech. My daughter-in-law doesn't react the way I was taught (made) to react if overlooked in the workforce. The new generation is bold and unapologetic in their approach, hopefully proving through their actions and results that they are an indispensable part of this industry. It's time to stop tiptoeing around the issue and assertively claim our space in the tech world. AQ

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