

# Assignments Are Critical Tools to Achieve Workplace Gender Equity

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Work assignments can be a powerful means of propelling employees' growth but — unless managed deliberately — they can also undermine efforts to build a diverse workforce.



Facing unprecedented levels of employee burnout and [historic quit rates](#), how can companies lead with a model that attracts and retains talent? This period of transition, and the lessons learned from the pandemic, offer organizations a unique opportunity to improve and refine their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies. <sup>1</sup> It is imperative that leaders consider the landscape of work assignments at their companies as a foundation for greater workforce equity.

“Assignments” can comprise work tasks, activities, or projects. Scholars have long identified a gender gap in access to the kinds of assignments — large in scope, highly visible, and strategically important — that are seen as essential to career advancement. An estimated 70% of leadership

development [occurs through experiential learning](#), especially the kind offered by these challenging stretch assignments.

Yet women are largely overlooked for challenging work assignments. One factor is that women typically have [fewer ties to influential decision makers who connect people to assignment opportunities](#). Biased performance evaluations also may play a role, with women seeing no gains in their performance scores for the very behaviors (such as “taking charge”) for which men are rewarded. <sup>2</sup> One study showed how promotability depends on having had challenging past projects — setting up a vicious cycle in which women never get ahead. <sup>3</sup> Women of color, tasked with the additional burden of “fitting in” at predominantly White organizations, may find channels to career-advancing work blocked entirely. <sup>4</sup>

Historically, companies have not tracked assignment processes. In one 2010 report, when HR leaders were asked the percentage of “business-critical/important” assignments held by women, [the top two responses were “1% to 10%” and “not measured.”](#) Both career-advancing work and meaningful work are cornerstones of positive professional experiences. But leaders may know little about who has access to significant assignments, or they may be unaware of

how a lack of access drives burnout, turnover, and dwindling diversity on the leadership bench.<sup>5</sup>

These many unknowns about assignments drive an information gap that grows riskier as countless organizations head into new hybrid work arrangements. To quantify this risk, our team at the Stanford VMware Women’s Leadership Innovation Lab ran a study of assignments, using data that many companies collect and managers review at least yearly: employee engagement survey (EES) data. We examined pre-pandemic EES results for a midsized global technology company.<sup>6</sup> Only one question on the survey asked about employees’ perceptions of access to career-advancing assignments.

The company did not track assignments by gender, but our analysis showed a statistically significant gender difference. Relative to men, women were 15% less likely to report opportunities for career-advancing assignments.<sup>7</sup> This gender difference held even after we adjusted for employee and job characteristics. That is, women were less likely than men to perceive their assignment opportunities as having career value. This was the case even among women and men in the same department and role.

We then supplemented this analysis with a descriptive look at two related survey questions on our case company’s EES: one about making meaningful contributions, and another about receiving recognition for one’s work. Of women, 39% saw greater contribution opportunities than recognition opportunities, compared with 34% of men. While this particular gender gap may seem small, limited opportunities can accumulate over the course of a career and contribute to the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership. Imagine how these results could inform today’s leaders in an economy recalibrating during an ongoing global pandemic.

## An Equity-Minded Assignment Framework

Unseen assignment disparities can destabilize efforts to build a diverse workforce all the way up the ladder, so we propose an equity-minded assignment framework for leaders and managers to implement in the short, medium,

and long terms, *starting today*. The purpose of this framework is to better identify and strengthen the role of work assignments in meeting DEI goals.

**In the short term, embed assignment conversations in the “return to office” tools for managers.** Many companies are deploying managerial tools to support employees and teams in their decision-making about hybrid work arrangements. These one-on-one meetings offer a promising context for managers to discuss assignments with their direct reports. These discussions are critical, as will be the consequences of *not* talking about assignments: Hybrid work arrangements, where some employees are in the office while others are working from home, run the risk of creating **inequality in employees’ visibility to leaders** and thus who might be seen as the right person for a particular assignment.

These conversations present a unique opportunity to explore assignments and have a forward-looking career discussion. Managers may ask, for example:

- What are you currently working on that you see as critical to your career development and advancement? What work do you find especially meaningful? How do these areas overlap?
- As we return to the office, how can we align your work with your career advancement goals and your sense of fulfillment? Which assignments do you need in order to get there, and to whom do you need to be visible?
- How will your hybrid work arrangement give you exposure to the right people and workstreams?

These questions will encourage managers and employees to think through not just the *where* of the hybrid workplace, but the *what* and with what career *outcomes*. Answering them can push employees to think beyond work-life factors in their ideal hybrid design — and can nudge everyone in the organization to view assignments as a core tool in employee development.

**In the medium term, develop a broader view of the assignments landscape in the organization.** In the wake of workforce disruption and heightened attention to racism,

sexism, and inequality, leaders have been called on to accelerate their DEI efforts. To achieve real change, assignments need to be embedded in DEI strategy. The first step is to get a better handle on the baseline landscape of assignments by identifying the most important assignments for career advancement and meaning. Conducting focus groups with employees across all organizational functions can help inform the strategy by identifying common assignment-related themes and persistent problems to tackle.

Once the landscape is understood, leaders can create accountability mechanisms for more equitable assignment allocations and outcomes. Leaders need to ensure that top assignments are made available across organizational functions and that supports are in place for people to execute them successfully. For example, the former CEO of Jamba Juice, James White, changed how high-profile work was assigned by deliberately giving defined strategic projects to people who were rarely selected for them and providing them with dedicated time to meet project goals. Rethinking these channels [diversified the internal pipeline of people ready to advance to leadership roles](#).

In performance evaluation and talent calibration meetings, leaders must explicitly account for assignments — those assigned to employees who are promoted and, just as importantly, to employees who are not. Managers should consider whether promotion gaps between women and men, for instance, would shift if assignments were changed. Internal audits and assignment dashboards, which visually clarify who on which teams is doing what, can inform data-driven managerial decision-making about assignments. The goal is not to decrease managerial autonomy but rather to empower managers with a broad view of the landscape, to increase assignment transparency and build opportunities for connection.

Finally, the range of assignments needs to be balanced fairly within units and across different roles. In mapping and building on this landscape, leaders must not overlook “low-promotability” work. Linda Babcock and colleagues have shown that women are more often asked to volunteer for lower-leverage assignments than are men, and they agree to do this work more often, too.<sup>8</sup> Expectations about

women’s propensity to volunteer for tasks that everyone wants completed but no one wants to do themselves can route women away from career-advancing work and ultimately deepen gender stereotypes and inequity in the workplace. Leaders must engage managers, HR professionals, and staff members focused on DEI efforts in building a more equitable assignment space to support the advancement of all workforce groups.

**Over the long term, make assignments a core part of your employee engagement surveys, and link the results to your talent strategy.** The EES has long been a tool for organizations to take the temperature of their workforces by collecting engagement data and identifying employee needs. But work assignments are rarely measured on EESs, despite their significance for motivation, engagement, and equitable advancement. (In examining EESs at four large multinational companies in various sectors, we found that, of nearly 200 total questions, only five explicitly mentioned work assignments.) Including even a few questions about assignments will allow for new insights, and running gap analyses that integrate EES data can lead to even more significant change. (A gap analysis is a tool that allows an organization to diagnose gaps between an organizational goal and an actual outcome.)

Questions included on a survey define what information leaders can know about their workforces. “What is not measured is critically important to consider,” said Molly Anderson, CEO of Exponential Talent, a diversity and inclusion consulting firm. She also noted that “companies often draw the wrong conclusions ... through an error of omission.” We suggest using one question as a starting point for study: “To what extent do you have sufficient opportunities to work on assignments that are important to your career development?” Gathering information about access to critical assignments and their connections to particular employees’ goals is a good jumping-off point that organizations can track in real time.

After you ask questions, it’s crucial to [examine group differences in the responses](#) as part of conducting a larger gap analysis into which EES data can factor directly.<sup>9</sup> Say, for example, that an organization sets a DEI goal to increase the representation of women and people of color in

leadership roles. Collected EES data might show that these groups perceive access to leadership development assignments differently than White men do. With assignment-specific EES data, leaders can then act to meet their DEI goal, equipped with information to open dialogue, inspire interventions, and course-correct.

## Assignments Looking Forward

The best approach to incorporating assignments in your talent strategy is multipronged. As organizations prepare for hybrid work arrangements, assignments should be discussed in managers' one-on-ones with their direct reports; embedded in DEI goals, performance evaluations, and promotion conversations; explored in focus groups; and measured on EESs and in gap analyses. When any of these approaches reveals potential disparities in the experiences or perceptions of assignments between groups, leaders should focus on revamping their processes.

Leaders don't have to tackle all of these approaches at once. Any increase in understanding the state of assignments in an organization, and in beginning to act on these insights, will in fact be a talent differentiator. After the pandemic-driven exodus of women — [especially women of color](#) — from the workforce, companies cannot afford to lose more of them to the additional burnout wrought by unfairly allocated assignments. By keeping steady tabs on their workforces when change is both inevitable and highly uncertain, forward-looking leaders can quickly identify and intervene in emergent negative trends and drive positive changes to empower their workforces equitably.

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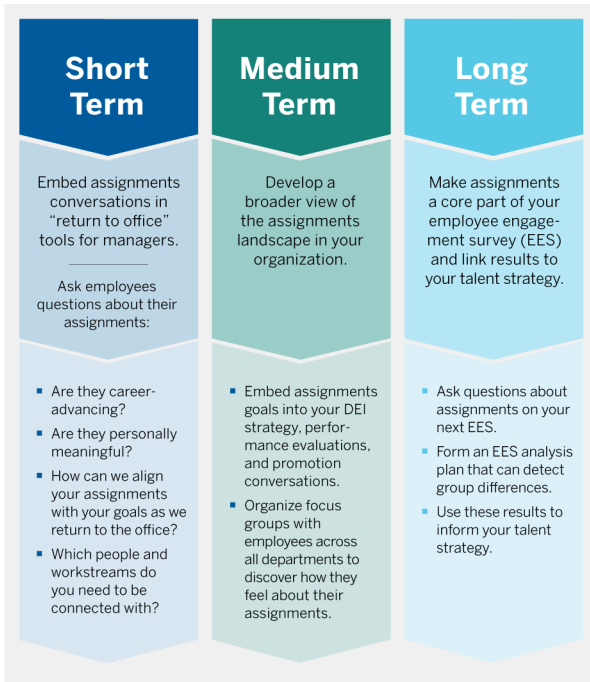
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6. This EES data was collected in 2015 from over 4,000 respondents at this company.
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9. It is worth noting that we could not conduct our case study analyses by employees' race and ethnicity because this information was not collected

on the company's EES, so our analyses cannot speak to both gender and race assignment inequities. While legal and privacy considerations in different geographies may constrain what can be measured, companies

should strive to examine such data by race and ethnicity, geography, and other social dimensions based on their diversity strategies.

## An Assignment Framework for the Short, Medium, and Long Term

An equity-minded assignment framework can help leaders and managers better identify and strengthen the role of work assignments in meeting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals.



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