

Language-based discrimination is prevalent both in the office and in remote work – but in different ways

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Language-based discrimination is a prevalent form of discrimination in multilingual organizations, finds new research by Aalto University School of Business.

Language-based discrimination is when people experience an unfair disadvantage as a result of their written and spoken language. For example, excluding employees from conversations as they don't have the same first language.

The case study, conducted by researchers Hilla Back and Rebecca Piekkari, investigated migrant professionals' experiences of language-based discrimination across physical and virtual spaces.

Their findings reveal that when people work from home, language-discrimination was primarily organisational and more subtle than when people are office based.

The researchers say this is because in virtual spaces, it is easier to discriminate against other employees without getting caught. They add that in these settings, it is less personal, therefore instigators don't witness the effects of their discrimination.

"In virtual spaces they could 'invisibilize' minority needs without physically witnessing the effects of discrimination – also aiding in the prevalence of organizational discrimination in virtual spaces." Doctoral candidate Hilla Back notes.

The study also revealed that remote working sped up the process of excluding migrant professionals, due to the fact it was easier for employees to have separate meetings and parallel virtual channels for informal conversations.

"Consequently, migrant professionals became more invisible to their co-workers in virtual spaces, remaining in their own English-speaking bubble, out of sight and out of mind," says doctoral candidate Hilla Back.

Solutions include implementing an inclusive language policy, which is characterized by a shared language by managers and employees in formal and informal situations, enhanced tolerance of variation in proficiency levels, and a neutral vocabulary. Other suggestions include introducing a social etiquette for remote work to ensure that all employees understand what socially accepted behavior is, according to the researchers.

The study was published in the Journal of World Business.

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