Cognitive Biases in the Workplace

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In this article I will explain about Cognitive biases and their grave consequences in the workplace.

A Bias aka 'unfairness' is generally defined as an inclination or predjuice for or against a person or a thing where the biased individuals are unable to think rationally while ignoring logic, facts and evidence, and other possibilities.

My focus is on figuring out the biases which can be seen in the workplace. I will give examples for the said biases either based on my personal experiences or the possibilities that might occur with other people anywhere on this planet. It's a very interesting topic, right?

List of Biases (given in the order from worse to least worse, but still worse)

Confirmation Bias: "Seeking and confirming with what you already believe"

It's the tendency where individuals give more weight to the information which confirms with their pre-existing beliefs while ignoring or overlooking evidence which contradicts the said beliefs. This bias makes you confirm with those events or outcomes which favours your predjuice and you eventually look for more evidence which strengthens the said belief. Basically, it means you are seeking what you believe and when that actually happens for real, then you double down your confirmation on it.

This is a wild type of bias and a dangerous one. Here are some examples.

Example 1: "Performance assumptions"
A project manager might focus only on either the positive or the negative aspects of the performance of employee which aligns with his initial impression either positive or negative and shows to ignore feedback or facts which contradicts with his/her perception.

Ram a senior manager has multiple teams under him where each team is working in different technologies. He formed a belief that the back-end team is an incompetent team as they always deliver late than his expectation. One time he received one negative feedback from the client about the performance of one of his employee in the back-end team. This made him confirm his belief that the backend team is indeed

incompetent, lazy and under performing and he decided to give bad rating to the whole team during the Performance and Review cycle. Here, Ram failed to recognise what are the factors which lead to the late delivery of the product by the backend team. He took the overall time taken by the back-end team to develop the product and made blind assumptions that their development effort must take the same time as the front-end team achieved. Just because the front-end is able to delivery soon than the back-end does not mean they are better performing. The effort and the complexity of the tasks undertaken has a huge role in meeting the deadlines. Also, just because the front-end team delivered the product sooner does not mean they are excellent performers. We don't know whether that team's work done is either solid or of poor quality. Infact, Ram might see serious code bugs in the front-end code while later running in the production. Whereas code commited by back-end might turn out to be solid, but they already received a poor rating because the performance and appraisal cycle happened way before the apps are moved to production. Moreover we also don't know whether Ram is an inexperienced project manager who doesn't have a clue how long each team's effort generally take based on historical projects completed, which makes him both baised and ignorant.

Example 2: "First impression makes everything"
Ram the manager has a positive first impression about his team lead Deepak because of Deepaks's communication and leadership skills. He believes that since Deepak is able direct his developers to work effectively, he must also be a great developer himself. This kind of effect can be seen during Interviews. One time a bug occured in code and the rest of the team went on leave. Deepak with his knowledge fixed the issue and make the client happy. This made Ram happy and since then Ram confirmed his belief that Deepak indeed is a great developer and considered to give him a good rating compared to those developers who did the heavy lifting. Infact, each of the developers under Ram had their own challenges and they fixed several bugs during the period of the project but their efforts went unnoticed. Just by solving a bug and saving the night, Deepak gets to enjoy the appraisal which he was seeking which came at the cost of losing the appraisal and the bonus for the developers. In this whole story, there is no real proof that Deepak is a expert developer. Neither we or Ram knows how Deepak exactly solved that issue. Infact he might has got his code fix from Stackoverflow.com. But Ram fell again to overcome his confirmation bias which overvalued one person's effort over the others.

Confirmation bais is a huge pain in ass to deal with and it compromises people's integrity, confidence and could overturn careers especially when there is a negative setting.

Can you think of any more examples?

Halo Effect Bias: "Over/Undervaluing everything based on few aspects or traits"

This is the real deal and it's simple to explain. The Halo effect states that individuals tend to show favoritism or the opposite, by Undervaluing or Overvaluing a person's ability of a thing based on cherry-picking one or two aspects of that person or events occurred.

Example 1: "Physically appearances/traits is equal to Skill"
Ram the manager believes that beautiful and confident looking people are creative and intelligent. Even though creativity and confidence has no relation, Ram shows favoritism and admonishes those who look the look, talk the talk and makes wrong assumptions that those individuals are great at work, skillful and have leadership qualities. Those who struggles with communication skill or dress poor is assumed to be less competent overall and are punished in some way even if thet are technically strong.

Example 2: "Your past determines your future"
If an employee has made a significant mistake in the past, there's a risk that this negative event influences perceptions of their overall competence, potentially overshadowing subsequent achievements.
Another example in the same context: Ram the manager only remember the mistakes commited by an employee and decides to rate his/her performance without considering all the greater or many achievement done during the course the project.

Example 3: "Not seeking for future help"
Mr.A would go to Mr.B for help with some code issue, but unfortunately Mr.B is not able to provide a solution at the moment. Mr.A now considers that Mr.B is incompetent and lacks the necessary knowledge and starts to approach others for help even for newer issues which Mr.B has the capability to solve. Mr. A fell for the Halo effect by thinking that if a person is bad at one thing, then they must be bad at everything.

Example 4: "Team disagreements makes you a bad person."
In this one if an individual is having frequent disagreements with the Team, he or she is deemed as a "difficult to work with" person even though there is no single shred of evidence to prove that as true. Just because someone is disagreeing with you or with the team doesn't make them a bad person or difficult to work with. Just a few aspects of an individual cannot and will not determine the whole character. Maybe, you must start to if there is a possibility that either you or your Team itself is difficult to work with and that individual who is at disagreement always is new to the team and their radical methods, but he functions well with the rest of us.

Have you fell victim for the Halo Effect?

Self-Serving Bias: "Only the positive results are mine, but not the negative ones"

It's the tendency of individuals to attributing positive results and events to their own character and abilities, considering themselves as exceptional, but attributing any negative results to the external factors and taking no ownership. It's a defense mechanism of the brain to protect its self-esteem.

Example 1: "Success and Faliure Attribution"
Ram the manager has successfully delivered a project on time as agreed with the client. He thinks that this success of the project is a direct result of his exceptional leadership skills and decision making. But better did he know that this success of the project is not only the result of his action, but it's a combined group effort where there are several people involved at play who did their own heavy lifting contributing to the overall success.

If it was a failure Ram would have either blamed his team or push it on other external factors like saying he was given inadequate resources taking no ownership of the failure, but shifting the blame on his higherups. This is how some people endorse themselves as a better person to travel Onsite and work even though that person might lack the skill and the knowledge but there are others who are way more deserving and could do a better job.

Similarly a team member may attribute the team's efforts to their own achievement and potray a different picture to the management during the performance and appraisal cycle. However, if the team faced challenges, they might attribute those to external factors and on the worst case they might blaming it on a scapegoats who can't defend themselves.

Example 2: "Performance review interpretation"
Another example is when a team member received positive feedback from the manager, they would think it is due to their hard work and efforts and strongly believes that they need to continue the same way in the future assignments but when a negative feedback or constrictive criticism they might blame on it lack of clear instructions or other obstacles.

Can you recall how many times you have seen people at work exhibiting such behaviour?

Choice Supportive Bias: "I came up with it so it must be the best option"

In this Bias, people tend to show favouritism towards an idea and support it's cause just because they came up with it. One might think this is similar to Self-Serving Bias but it's different.

Example 1: "Finding the best option"
A team of four is asked by the client to come up with a good website design for a new online service. Shray, the team's architect also came up with his design and considers that his Design is the optimal design for this work. When his teammates presents their designs in the group meetings, Shray fails to be agree with others even though those are better designs than what he came up with. He refuses to listen and have a brainstorming sessions with his team to understand why their design could work better than his and he thows out all logic and reasoning out of the window. According to him, just because he came up with the design then it must be the best which shows an underlying superiority complex because he believes "He knows better". This leads to compromises and poor choices and could affect the possibility of the client getting a better product.

Have you ever met a person like Shray at work? If not, consider yourself lucky. So, please don't become like that people.

Anchoring Bias: "Taking a blind trust with the first piece of information provided".

This is the dread of Biases and I don't like it. This is somewhat related to another bias called "Availability Heuristic". It's the kind of bias where individuals shows blind trust and decides to go with the first piece of information provided to them and develop opinions about it without considering other alternatives options.

Example 1: "Giving feedback about a Team"
In the mid course of a project the project manager Ram is released by the client for some undisclosed reasons. He is to be replaced by a new project manager Ganesh. While the client asks Ram to help Ganesh make a smooth transition into the project by understanding the methods, standards, work timings and structure. Ram gave some negative feedback based on his perception and understanding of some of the teammates. But without considering whether what Ram said is true or not, Ganesh totally gave in to this farce and started to treat his new teammates in the same way Ram did. He failed to take the evidence, history, challenges and circumstances of the past work into account or by validating the same doubts with other senior members who knows the team better, but totally ignores everything and proceeds with the first piece of information provided to him by Ram. He starts judging his new teammates and thinks all of them as good for nothing fellows, making it a "work hell" for the team and proceed to affect their careers in a bad way. The same could apply in the positive scenarios. If Ram gave some positive feedback about specific individuals because he deemed them as talented because they look the look, talk the talk, and knows to manage people instead of doing work, Ganesh could carry the same perception without considering to re-evaluate his opinions about those said individuals. This way, he might give those "Deemed Worthy by Ram" individuals a free pass to work however they like, come to office whenever they want, but micro-manage others who didn't receive a similar feedback.

Example 2: "Project planning and estimate revision"
A client a requirement to develop an app in a new and trending technology stack which they are not aware of previously. A developer who knows this technology was asked by his manager to provide a time estimate to complete the work. Without having much information initially to properly predicte how long it would take, the developer makes reasonable guesses based on his past work completed for his previous clients and tells the manager that it would take 1 week to finish job. With each passing day he realises that the work he was assigned is infact complex and there are plenty of dependencies which he fullfill before he can make progres, and so he re-evaluates his efforts. But the orginal estimate of 1 week he told to his manager was already considered by the client as "Acceptable" and they wondered it must be an easy task to the developer to finish with this new technology they are unware of. Even though now the developer and the manager realised the

challenges ahead, the client is unwilling to revise their deadlines. Basically, here the client has fallen for Anchoring bias, where they took the first piece of information provided to them and based their whole planning and taks for other teams based on the developer's incorrect first estimate.

A similar case could also be observed during project budgeting by the clients. Their initial planning might under fund the project because they based their opinions based on the limited information they had with them in the start, but as the project's scale and requirements grew large, still the client and the management sticks to their original budget and deadlines as they already anchored their judgments and expectations based on that initial estimate, even if circumstances change.

Example 3: "Anchoring on past failures"
A manager proposes his client to use an new technology stack which he came across in the Marketplace to achieve his client's goals. So they all gave it a go; to use the said technology in the spirit of experimentation and bringing newness to their business which already heavily relies on legacy systems. But the legacy systems work fine. After sometime has passed by and the client begun to realise that the project has failed. They then believed that the technology that's used here is a bad solution and also consider it difficult to work with. Never in their future projects they would entertain the use of the technology in question and they continued to rely in their legacy system and went to improve on it instead. Here the client doesn't know what has gone wrong with the technology they started with and what great opportunities they missed. All they cared about from the beginning is whether a solution works or not and never bothered to look at the factors which could have made it a success. The causes of this failure can be anything, like lack of resources, lack of skilled resources, lack of team coordination etc. The client anchored to the belief that the technology used is bad while failing to realise they are also new to it and inexperienced.

Example 4: "Job interviews"
The first information received about a candidate, such as their initial response to a question, can anchor the interviewer's perception throughout the interview, impacting the overall evaluation.

Outcome Bias: "It didn't work out for me so it must be bad"

This goes hand in hand with Status quo bias. But this is as simple as it sounds. The essense of it is about individuals showing a strong conviction towards outcome of events and tend to make wild opinions about it. Such as, if something didn't workout as expected or not given them the desired result, then it must be bad altogether, Or if something failed, then they ignore to rethink what kind of factors they were presented with when they started. A similar attitude of thinking can be seen towards success or positive outcomes. Just because something worked for you doesn't mean that the thing you tried will always work or that you are exceptional. Sometimes the results of your outcome can be pure lucky or random and has nothing to do with you or your actions. Not everything can be seen as black and white.

Example 1: "Awarding or Punishing solely based on result"
A good example of this would be when an employee's performance is solely evaluated based on the results obtained without considering how much support they have been provided overall or the challenges they have faced. You could be part of a team where your team lead is willing to give more work opportunities to someone else because he or she has fallen for the Halo Effect and you are robbed of the said work and the same opportunities to ever prove your worth. The same could be seen when you join a new organisation with higher expectations but you have observed the management is biased unfair with their project assignment and given you the kind of work which you don't like or is not the best use of your capabilities. In all of such cases, you have been affected with work discrimination and later your performance is evaluated based on the results you have achieved at the end.

Example 2: "Hiring for one work and asking to do another work"
As said in the previous example, you could be hired by an organisation for one role but after you join their teams you would given entirely different kind of work. The management fails to answer why they took such a decision and often the response you here is that "Work is work, you are getting paid anyway so just do it", Or they might simple say, "What's your problem in doing it?". But the fact is you never agreed to do that said

work which you weren't hired for, but the main problem comes when your whole performance is evaluated based on the work which was assigned. Even though the management knows that the work given to use is not the right use of your capabilities, they given you less significant work but still rate you on the same basis finally leading to Outcome Bias.

Example 3: "Failing to recognise or promote"
Another example of outcome-based bias in the workplace could be promotions or recognition based solely on quantifiable achievements, such as sales numbers or project completions. If other valuable contributions like teamwork, innovative ideas, or mentoring are overlooked because they are harder to quantify, it can lead to a biased perspective that favors easily measurable outcomes over a more holistic evaluation of an employee's overall impact.

Bandwagon Effect Bias: "If one is doing it, let us all do the same"

A bandwagon effect is at play when individuals fall for the herd mentality and do actions which could result in not achieving their full potential and as result this could cost their individuality.

Example 1: "Asking teams to take up some certification"
An example for the bandwagon effect could be, Mr. A is interested in learning the trending AI and machine learning technologies. He has done some certification on it and showcased his achievement it to his team. His manager, felt that if everyone in the team could do that same and so he thought he can make his team look exceptional in the eyes of his superiors. He asks the team to learn and take up the certification, and the individual of the team blindly does the same without questioning the decision. Here both the team and the manager fallen victim for heard mentality aka Bandwagon effect. A better choice would be to nurture ideas in which each individual seem to show interest. Just because Mr. A did it doesn't mean everyone has to do it nor there is no proof that the thing they are doing could be useful.

Example 2: "Adoption of technology"
Similarly in the marketplace, when someone hears an unverified rumour that AWS is trending and people who are skilled in that are getting 6 figure salaries, then this news spreads like wildfire and everyone who wants a 6 figure salary would jump on the bankwagon to train themselves in AWS, even though there could be better and easily achievable options. The same could be observed in commercial setting or with clients. The recent buzz word is "Cloud" and "AI". So, companies would start to invest heavily in cloud just because everyone is doing it thinking they would be left behind even though cloud solutions may not work with their line of services, leading to a wastage of money, effort and time.

Group Think Bias: "Let's do it as a Group!"

Actually, this must go to the top I guess. The Group Think and the Bandwagon effect are two biases that are closely related to eachother but there is a subtle difference. Group Think bias occurs when certain individuals are suppressed by the Group they are part of, either knowingly or unknowingly which could potentially lead to loss of outstanding ideas and leading to bad decisions. So basically, Group Think is a phenomenon where a group of people prioritize harmony and conformity over critical thinking, leading to flawed decision-making. The examples of group think are vast.
Team Consensus without Exploration:

Example 1: "Reaching consensus quick"
In a team meeting, members quickly reach a consensus on a new project without thoroughly exploring alternative ideas or potential risks, as the desire for unity overrides critical analysis.
Avoidance of Conflicting Opinions:

Example 2: "Feeling fear for raising concerns"
A team hesitates to voice concerns or disagree with a proposed strategy, fearing that dissenting opinions might disrupt the perceived harmony within the team. If you are part of such a team then they might feel that you are bringing conflicts and imbalance in team.

Example 2: "Overemphasis on Consensus"
A group tends to prioritize reaching a unanimous decision rather than allowing for healthy debate and dissent, leading to a decision that might not be the most well-informed. If you are part of such group, then they also might try to force your hand by saying "Everyone agreed, so should you".

Example 4: "Echo Chamber Meetings"
During decision-making, team members only seek input and feedback from like-minded individuals, creating an echo chamber effect and limiting the diversity of perspectives considered. This behaviour is prevalent among IT professionals. If someone faced some problem with a particular individual or a group, they totally avoid them and seek for validation from others who would support their thought process. It's the "I want to hear what I want to hear so I would go look for people who would listen" kind of behaviour.
It sucks to be suppressed because everyone is falling in line doesn't it?

Status Quo Bias: "It works fine, so why to change now?"

Status Quo Bias is the tendency of individuals to resist the change and trying to maintain the existing state of affairs. They would be blinded to not seeing the advantage of a change and the postive outcomes which could potentially happen.

Example 1: "Technology Adoption"
Resistance to adopting new technologies or processes, sticking to existing systems simply because they are familiar, even if more efficient options are available.

Example 2: "Team Restructuring"
Resistance to reorganizing teams or changing reporting structures, even when it could improve collaboration or efficiency, because people are comfortable with the current setup.

Example 3: "Policy Changes"
Reluctance to update or change workplace policies, even if they are outdated or inefficient, due to a preference for maintaining the current state of affairs.

Example 4: "Training Programs"
Hesitance to introduce new training programs or methods, as employees may prefer the familiar approaches they've used in the past, even if there are more effective training methods available.

Availability Heuristic Bias: "I am going with what I have and what I remember"

It the phenomenon where individuals are prone to take mental shortcuts while making decisions or doing some analysis instead of carefully examining the options and taking informed decisions. In essence, it's about people making judgments about the likelihood of events based on their availability in memory and recent memorable events which could be either positive or negative.

Example 1: "Decision making"
A team, having recently faced challenges with a particular project approach, might be quick to dismiss similar approaches in the future without thoroughly evaluating their potential success, purely based on the availability of the previous negative experience.

Example 2: "Risk assessment"
After a recent security breach, a company might overestimate the likelihood of future cyber threats and allocate resources disproportionately to cybersecurity measures, even if other risks are equally or more significant.

Example 3: "Training programs"
If a training program received a positive feedback, it is likely to influence all the future decisions to be made to be similar in kind because people who are conducting these program could be making blind assumptions that the program worked, but not realising that employees could be displaying favouritism at hand, even though there are other alternative programs which are much more efficient and helpful to the company.

Example 4: "Considering only recent achievements or failures for Performance rating"
During the performance and appraisal cycle of the company, the manager could be drawn towards a recent positive achivement of the employee but forgets to conduct a comprehensive review of the employee for the overall duration of the project. Similarly, if an employee did something recently which affected the project negatively, the manager could forget all the other achievements the employee has brought to the team in the past just because its been a while and it's hard to remember the said achievements, and also it's a natural tendency that people tend to overlook the past and focus more on the most recent events.

Fundamental Attribution Error Bias: "I blame you for everything"

This one is my favourites of the list. The fundamental attribution error is a cognitive bias where individuals attribute outcomes or events surrounding them to personal aspects such as character and personality of a person instead of realising there could be external factors at play which led to those outcomes or events.

Example 1: "Failed Team Interaction"
Gita an employee who is part of a team is attending the team meeting regularly and does her job. She won't do anything more or anything less than asked. When invited to join a team parties or people trying to getting to know her she often skips. This behaviour of her is seen by her colleagues as Egoistic, Self-centred or even narcissistic. But her colleagues failed to realise that Gita might have other commitments and things to do in her personal life that she doesn't find the time to interact. So, people being ill informed starts to intentionally avoid her and make her feel like she doesn't belong to the group as their interests do not mix and expectations are not met. They tried to force their expectations on to her and failed to get what they want and so they finally resort to avoidance and despise, which eventually would affect supporting her at work.
It's not Gita's problem that she didn't commit to her colleagues social expectations when she accepted the Job.

Example 2: "Coworker's Tardiness"
If Ram is consistently late to meetings, there's a tendency to attribute this behavior to their personality (e.g., laziness or lack of punctuality) rather than considering external factors like traffic or family commitments.

Example 3: "Team Member's Mistake"
If a team member Gita makes a mistake on a project, others may attribute it to a lack of competence or carelessness (internal factors) without considering external factors like unclear instructions or time constraints.

Example 4: "Manager's Decision-Making"
If your manager makes a decision that leads to challenges, team members might attribute it to the manager's flawed judgment (internal) rather than acknowledging external factors like incomplete information available at the time.

Example 5: "Employee's Reaction to Feedback"
If an employee reacts negatively to constructive feedback, there's a risk of attributing it solely to their defensive personality (internal) rather than considering external factors such as the delivery of the feedback or the employee's stress levels.

Dunning-Kruger Effect Bias: "To believe you have something when you don't"

It's a phenomenon where individuals with lower skill, talent or abilities tend to overestimate their capabilities and often find themselves in hot waters, while people with higher abilities tend to underestimate their own and fail to achieve greater results. Basically its problem people face for not having prior information or feedback before they evaluating and understanding their abilities.

Example 1: "Inexperienced project manager"
An inexperienced project manager may overestimate their ability to handle complex projects, assuming that they have a solid grasp of project management principles without recognizing their lack of experience.

Example 2: "Novice in new technology"
An employee newly introduced to a sophisticated software tool might think they have mastered it quickly, underestimating the learning curve and the depth of knowledge required to use the tool effectively.

Example 3: "Ineffective communicator"
An employee with poor communication skills might believe they are excellent communicators, failing to recognize the impact of their communication style on misunderstandings and team dynamics.

Example 4: "Aspiring Leader"
An individual aspiring to a leadership role may overestimate their leadership abilities, assuming that they possess the necessary skills without acknowledging areas that require development, such as conflict resolution or strategic planning.

Survivorship Bias: "If something is working, then it must be perfect"

This is my most favourite among the biases.

This is a cognitive behaviour where people tend to make arguments or statements about something and try to portray that as the truth or as a path to success, and take or recommend action in that direction, but they already ignored those who have failed who also followed such a similar path but are not present to tell the tale. It's the bias which more or less influenced the "God problem". Basically, Survivorship bias occurs when we focus only on the successes or survivors and ignore the failures or those who didn't make it.

Example 1: "Training programs and their success stories"
Companies showcases the success stories of those individuals who took their courses and portray as if that is the path to success. But just because few talented individuals who took their courses passed with flying colours, doesn't mean their courses are working. Those who took the courses and failed are not there to complain, and those who succeed won't say whether their success is totally because of the course they took. Even if those who succeeded truly believe the courses helped to achieve their success, it does not mean everyone else who takes the course will also succeed. There could be other factors at play leading to those success stories.

Example 2: "Promotion selection bias"
A company analyzes the career paths of current leaders to identify common traits. However, this analysis ignores employees who possessed similar traits but didn't get promoted, providing a skewed perspective. Just because someone is promoted and has a certain work habits doesn't mean that people who follow the same habits would also succeed. Infact people who follow different paths could also succeed.

Example 3: "Following successful project principles"
Just because a project succeeded in the past by following certain standards, methods and principles just doesn't make it an optimal example for all the future projects to folloe and does not guarantee us success. You are only focusing on seeing those which had succeeded but failing to see that there are other projects which also followed the same path but failed.

Survivorship bias can distort perceptions in the workplace by focusing only on the positive outcomes and neglecting the valuable lessons that can be learned from failures.

Final Statement:
There are many other biases such as Hindsight bias (aka "I told you so", or "I knew all along"), Ostrich Bias (aka "I only see positive things", or "I see only bad things happening"), Placebo Bias (aka "Believe first and make it a reality"), Selective perception (aka "I only want to hear what I want to listen" or "Let's show him what he wants to see") etc. Our objective should be always to think critically before making choices either small or big and take an informed decision before committing to our actions.

Biases are cruel and not fun to deal with especially when you are on the receiving end. I suspect that there are a lot of individuals who are facing such biases even now on a daily basis. It is highly likely that you are a person have faced such biases in the workplace atleast a bunch of times. I have never seen anyone who escaped them and it's hard for people to change their perception and cognition even after being informed of these biases. The human brain is tricky, and it even gets the best of the us to it's whims. So it's better not to consider Human beings as Gods, because we can never become that perfect being, because there is no such a thing as Perfection. Don't believe in people saying to do this do that. Just live your life the way you want to see it and do what you want to do while trying to make decisions that are good for you.

That's all. Bye.