

Are you guilty of these 'microaggressions'? Take our quiz to find out

Microaggressions are everywhere. Or are they? These perceived verbal or behavioural slights in the workplace are increasingly obsessing firms and their employees, with a split between those who see identifying them as a way to make the workplace a better and more equitable to everyone and those who see them as a false construct of the woke industrial complex.

Now the law firm Hogan Lovell is offering a "microaggressions hotline" to its staff who wish to record what it calls "interactional bias".

[Microaggressions](#) are often unintentional and even well-meaning, but convey a derogatory or negative attitude toward someone on the grounds of a protected characteristic such as race, sex, ability, gender or age. It's a complex and nuanced concept, but increasingly accepted across HR departments.

The idea originated in the US during the Seventies as a response to repeated acts of racial discrimination, now cover a wide range of behaviour, from the pretty straightforward unconscious racism of asking a person of colour where they "are from" to more complex, contested interactions, involving expressions that are seemingly innocent to large numbers of employees.

The most common criticism of microaggressions is that they encourage "hypersensitivity" and that such remarks are blown out of proportion, but others claim they can have a serious impact on mental and physical health, including [depression](#) and sleeping problems.

Hogan Lovell's initiative has been called "Orwellian" and tokenistic by critics and some have even questioned the motives behind it as a way to better cover the firm's liability to its employees.

Where do you stand in these scenarios?

Opening a door and letting someone through before you

Certainly, it's not to be encouraged in tight spaces. But holding the door open is distinct from holding it open and inviting someone else to pass before you, and familiarity with the other person is relevant contextually. Is the age of chivalry dead?

Criticising someone for not making eye contact

A colleague "appears" to repeatedly engage less than others in meetings – perhaps speaking quietly and not making eye contact, which is perceived as uncommunicative and potentially a lack of involvement with the subject or project being discussed. Do you say something?

Telling someone to 'man up'

Sometimes interchangeable with telling someone to "grow up" when you need someone to strengthen their resilience or demonstrate their ability to rise to a particular challenge. Oddly, it can be applied to anyone at any time.

'Don't mind my OCD!'

A very common throwaway remark when a person wants to make fun

of themselves and their neatness or organisational skills – it can be an innocent attempt to diffuse tension through self-deprecation.

‘You don’t have kids to pick up, so you can work later, right?’

This is an assumption about a person being “free” at times when other colleagues with children under 18 are most likely to want or need to be away from work. Being a working parent is tough – but is it fair to expect those without children to pick up the slack?

‘The way you have overcome your disability is so inspiring’

Clearly meant with the best intentions but how much do you really know about the nature of the hardships and challenges the person has faced?

‘You look too young to work here’

This is especially common towards women, based on the bias that they couldn’t possibly occupy high status positions. It might be meant as a compliment – but comes loaded with assumptions.

‘Are you having a senior moment?’

Obviously this is meant as a joke in most cases (especially with regards to using technology) – but it’s worth remembering that we all forget things, whatever age we are, and it also does not take into account considerations such as [the effects of the menopause](#). Unless you are the President of the United States, perhaps.

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