



Press Release

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New HEC Paris research reveals how strongly first impressions shape who gets opportunities at work

Developed by Prof. Brad Harris and colleagues, the paper shows that people are judged more on how they come across in person than on their track record on paper, and that initial judgements are difficult to overcome over time.

New [research](#) by Brad Harris, Professor of Management and Human Resources at HEC Paris, and his colleagues at the University of Macau and the University of Florida, finds that first impressions influence informal workplace decisions more strongly than formal ones.

Based on more than 200 unique samples from 145 previous studies, the meta-analytic review shows that first impressions are more strongly linked to relational outcomes, such as trust, workplace relationships and willingness to collaborate, than to achievement-oriented outcomes such as hiring decisions and performance evaluations. In fact, averaged across the studies, the link with relational outcomes was around 30% stronger. The study also highlighted that the influence of first impressions could persist weeks and even months into a new job.

The paper *First Impressions at Work: A Meta-Analytic Review* suggests that a snap judgement has some weight on whether someone is hired than, but even more on what happens after recruitment: who is trusted, who is invited into the in-group, etc. This likely happens because structured processes such as interviews and performance reviews can limit the influence of first impressions where they apply, but more informal workplace decisions remain heavily shaped by the assumptions people make when they first meet.

How first impressions form

Professor Harris explains that first impressions are shaped by a range of "cues", including appearance, behaviour and spoken interaction. The study analysed which of these were most

consistently connected with positive or negative first impressions. Communication cues, such as a person's accent, eye contact or facial expressiveness, showed the strongest and most consistent link. Surprisingly, content cues, the information about someone on paper such as their CV or reputation, showed the weakest and least consistent link.

"Behaviours such as eye contact and expressiveness can reflect cultural norms rather than competence, creating a risk that people are judged on factors unrelated to capability," noted Professor Harris. *"Our research also implies that first impressions left by workers facing language barriers may, in some instances, factor into the unconscious bias of their employers, further limiting their likelihood to succeed,"* he added.

Why bad first impressions stay and what companies should do

Comparing first impressions with later assessments of the same individuals, the study found that initial judgements remain closely linked to how people are evaluated much further into a working relationship. Impressions can shift when strong new evidence emerges, but confirmation bias makes recovery difficult: once a view has formed, subsequent behaviour tends to be read as proof of it. The influence of that impression on specific decisions does loosen as a relationship develops, but it remains a moderate predictor of outcomes more than a month after the first interaction.

"While perhaps more complicated than originally assumed, one rarely does get a second chance to make a significantly different first impression," said Professor Harris.

According to Professor Harris, the findings point to a gap in how organisations manage bias. Formal processes constrain it where it is measured, while informal allocation decisions sit almost entirely outside that scrutiny.

"First impressions can't be uniformly described as good or bad information, they're just underexamined elements of daily life whose value varies by situation and person. Formal hiring processes and many performance reviews already build in some structure to check them, but the open question for organizations is whether they should invest in potentially cumbersome structural elements for other interactions or trust human intuition in the day-to-day workings," he explained.

The paper, published in *Personnel Psychology* in July, was developed and co-written with Junhui Yang, Assistant Professor at the University of Macau, Brian W. Swider, Professor at the University of Florida, Bingjie Lu, Graduate Assistant at the University of Florida, and Kaidi Wang, Graduate Assistant at the University of Florida.

About HEC Paris:

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With 167 research professors from around the globe, HEC Paris produces and shares cutting-edge knowledge with over 5,000 students from more than 130 countries. Its campus serves as a true laboratory of innovation and dialogue, fully engaged with the world's diversity and global challenges.

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