

# THE IMPACT of the spotlight effect on trainee accountants

The spotlight effect is a cognitive bias where individuals overestimate the extent to which others might perceive them. Fostering a sense of belonging within the workplace and among trainees may mitigate the impact of the spotlight effect.

Trainees experience heightened self-consciousness and anxiety, often resulting from excessively worrying about making mistakes or being judged negatively. Being self-conscious and making inappropriate comparisons could hinder trainee accountants' ability to achieve their performance objectives successfully. The spotlight effect can significantly impact individuals in an office environment. Recognising and understanding its impact is essential for trainees, training officers, and other reporting officers.

## WHAT IS THE SPOTLIGHT EFFECT?

The spotlight effect is a cognitive bias where individuals overestimate the extent to which others notice their actions and appearance. This originates from being self-conscious and overthinking how others see us. The spotlight effect has positive and negative sides. The negative side includes feeling as if everyone is watching when you enter a room, and you immediately become self-aware of how you look, resulting in social anxiety. The positive side includes overestimating how others remember your achievements and the good things you said.

People evaluate their capabilities and viewpoints when they compare themselves to others. Such social comparison results from individuals comparing their abilities and opinions to those of others to eliminate uncertainty and obtain better self-evaluation. Social comparison and the spotlight effect result in social fear, panic or anxiety about socialisation with other persons, leading to tension and conflicts. Individuals with social

anxiety often feel judged and struggle with criticism, feeling that others view them in a negative light.

## WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THE SPOTLIGHT EFFECT ON TRAINEES?

Trainee accountants' working environment includes long hours, tight deadlines, and extensive workloads. Working under time pressure, they are also faced with additional challenges, such as academic achievement, numerical ability and language, which may impact their successful performance on the job. Ways in which the spotlight effect impacts trainees include:

- An **increased self-consciousness and anxiety**, feeling overly self-conscious about their actions, fearing that every mistake or minor error is being closely observed and judged by their colleagues and supervisors. This can lead to heightened anxiety and stress, affecting their overall well-being and performance.
- Due to the fear of being judged or making a mistake in front of others, trainees might hesitate to **participate in meetings, share ideas, or take on new challenges**. This can stifle creativity and innovation, as valuable contributions might be withheld.
- Constantly feeling like they are under scrutiny can erode a trainee's **self-confidence**. This lack of confidence can impact their decision-making ability, lead projects, or take the initiative, potentially hindering their career growth and development.
- Trainees may become overly cautious about their

language ability and **how they communicate**, fearing misinterpretation or criticism. This can lead to overly formal or stilted communication, hindering effective collaboration and team dynamics.

- The mental energy spent worrying about how others perceive them can distract trainees from their actual tasks, **reducing their productivity**. Focusing too much on potential judgments can lead to procrastination or avoidance of important tasks.
- Misunderstanding the level of attention others pay to their actions can affect how employees perceive their **relationships with colleagues**. They might misinterpret neutral or minor feedback as significant criticism, leading to unnecessary tension and conflicts.

### HOW CAN WE MITIGATE THE IMPACT OF THE SPOTLIGHT EFFECT ON TRAINEES?

Recognising the spotlight effect on trainees and understanding its impact is important for trainees, training officers, and other reporting officers. Understanding and addressing the spotlight effect in the workplace can create a more positive and productive environment where employees feel more confident and less self-conscious.

Fostering a sense of belonging can significantly mitigate the impact of the spotlight effect on trainee accountants. Experiencing a strong sense of belonging results in feeling supported, understood, and valued by colleagues and supervisors. This supportive environment can reduce the anxiety and self-consciousness associated with the spotlight effect.

Strategies to foster a sense of belonging and mitigate the spotlight effect include:

- Encourage a culture of support and understanding where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities rather than failures. This can help reduce the fear of judgement.
- Provide regular, constructive feedback to help trainees gain a realistic perspective on their performance and reduce unnecessary self-consciousness.
- Implement programmes that regularly recognise and reward employees for their contributions and achievements.
- Offer training or resources on mindfulness and stress management techniques to help trainees manage anxiety related to the spotlight effect.
- Create open channels for feedback where employees can express their concerns and suggestions without fear of judgement.
- Foster open and honest communication. Encourage trainees to share their concerns and feelings about being in the spotlight. Receiving constructive feedback helps put their actions into perspective and reduces the tendency to overestimate the attention they receive.
- Promote an inclusive culture where diversity is celebrated and everyone feels their unique contributions are valued.
- Organise team-building activities that help employees bond and develop a sense of camaraderie.

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- Lead by example, where supervisors and managers model vulnerability and openness, acknowledge their own mistakes and demonstrate that it's okay to be human and imperfect.

A strong sense of belonging often comes with a positive workplace culture emphasising collaboration, mutual respect, and collective success. In such an environment, the focus is on teamwork rather than individual shortcomings, which can diminish the spotlight effect. Trainees who feel they belong are more resilient to criticism. They are more likely to see feedback as a part of growth and improvement rather than as a judgment of their character or abilities.

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