EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES: Disability-Inclusive Hybrid Work Models
**OVERVIEW**

For a subset of employers, the shift to hybrid work, which includes work in the office and at remote locations (e.g., one’s home), will be one of the most significant and long-lasting organizational legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic. The key element of hybrid work is the increased use of telecommuting and technology, including virtual meeting platforms.

**The hybrid work model can offer benefits such as:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A higher level of flexibility, better work-life balance and a more tailored employee experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater productivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A significant and positive impact on diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) initiatives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**On the other hand, the hybrid work model could:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reduce in-person teamwork and collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exacerbate employees’ stress, depression and anxiety resulting from social isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create DEIA challenges as different and potentially unequal categories emerge among employees: those who are in the office and those who are remote (referred to as “proximity bias”)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The adoption and implementation of successful hybrid work policies requires:

- Intentional efforts by leadership
- Changes in the way businesses recruit, hire, onboard, retain, advance and evaluate the productivity of employees
- New approaches to how businesses train managers and supervisors

More members of historically underserved populations, including racial minorities, people with disabilities and women, are choosing to work remotely. Therefore, leaders who hope to maintain positive gains from DEIA initiatives must act deliberately to counter proximity bias. Failure to do so may further reinforce structural inequality along racial, gender and disability lines.

For many people with disabilities, the sudden acceptance of remote work as a legitimate business practice has been both frustrating and liberating:

- **Frustrating** because people with disabilities have been advocating for expanded access to telework for years and are asking, “Why did it take a global pandemic to recognize the legitimacy of remote work?”
- **Liberating** because employees who prefer or request telework as a form of reasonable accommodation under Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) may find that their employers are more receptive to allowing it (as opposed to a granting a different effective accommodation).

The purpose of the policy brief is to highlight the challenges and opportunities of designing and implementing disability-inclusive hybrid work models that facilitate DEIA. More specifically, the policy brief addresses the following topics and provides resources to assist organizations in implementing hybrid work models that are inclusive of all workers, including people with disabilities:
TRENDS IN THE USE OF HYBRID WORK MODELS

According to The Conference Board's April 2022 Report “The Reimagined Workplace Two Years Later”:

**Hybrid work is here to stay and will be one of the most significant organizational legacies of COVID-19.**
- A lasting effect of the pandemic will be remote work.
- Its usage will become widespread.
- Remote work has proven successful.
- Remote work means a fundamental shift in the way work is done, including where, when and by whom.

**With perceived productivity remaining high, 90% of organizations are now allowing hybrid work (part remote, part in the office) and two-thirds are allowing flexible work hours.**
- More employees are requesting hybrid work.
- This work preference is important because of its impacts on productivity and organizational culture.
- Self-reported productivity remains high.
- The long-term impact of hybrid work on organizational culture remains to be seen.

**Recruitment and retention of workers have become even more challenging in the last few years.**
- Labor shortages have made it more difficult for organizations to find and retain professional and office workers.
- The difficulty of recruiting new employees is adding stress to talent acquisition processes and increasing pressure on talent management to retain existing workers.

**Employee wellbeing has continued to deteriorate.**
- The number of employees reported to be seeking support for mental health conditions and identifying as “burned-out” has increased since the start of the pandemic, while levels of employment engagement/morale have decreased.
- As continued use of hybrid work is expected, organizations should help employees find ways to create boundaries that both bridge and separate personal and professional responsibilities in order to support and improve their wellbeing.

**Human resources (HR) leaders report that elements of their organizational cultures have changed for the better since the start of the pandemic.**
- Collaborative technology, genuine caring by managers, transparent communication by leaders and commitment to corporate responsibility have changed for the better for more than 70% of surveyed organizations.
- However, the level of trust between leaders and employees has changed for the worse for 25% of the surveyed organizations, perhaps indicating that deteriorating employee wellbeing has taken a toll.

---

1 Additional reports and articles highlighting trends in the use of the hybrid work model include:
- Key Trends of the Hybrid Working Model in 2022 (ONPASSIVE, June 12, 2022)
- Leveling the Playing Field in the Hybrid Workplace (PDF) (Future Forum, January 2022)
HYBRID WORK MODELS AND DEIA INITIATIVES

According to a McKinsey & Company article, hybrid work “has the potential to offer a higher level of flexibility, a better work-life balance, and a more tailored employee experience. This can have a disproportionately positive impact on diversity equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts as well as performance.” However, the hybrid work model also has the potential “to create an unequal playing field and to amplify in-group versus out-group dynamics, which can flip those advantages to the liabilities side of the ledger.”

McKinsey's survey found that:

- 75% of all respondents said that they prefer a hybrid work model, and only 25% said they prefer to work onsite full-time. Of employees currently working in an organization using a hybrid model, 85% indicated they would like to keep this model going forward. This strong preference of employees for a hybrid working model appears across industries, geography and demographic boundaries.
- Some historically underserved populations demonstrated an even stronger preference for hybrid work. For example, employees with disabilities were 11% more likely to prefer a hybrid model than employees without disabilities.

McKinsey research also explored the respondents' willingness to leave jobs because of work models:

- Of those who prefer hybrid work, 71% say they are likely to look for other opportunities if it is not available where they work now.
- Employees with disabilities were 14% more likely to leave their workplace than employees without disabilities.
- Black employees were 14% more likely to leave than their White peers. Women were approximately 10% more likely to leave because of work models than men.

The hybrid workplace model is creating a new DEIA challenge as different and potentially unequal categories emerge among employees: those who are in the office and those who are remote. This challenge is of particular significance because, as explained above, historically underserved populations, including people with disabilities and racial minorities, are more likely to prefer to work remotely.

A recent article written for the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) describes this challenge by using the term “proximity bias,” which is the tendency for people in positions of authority to show favoritism or give

---

2 Hybrid Work: Making it fit with your diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy (McKinsey & Company, April 2022)
3 Preventing Proximity Bias in a Hybrid Workplace (SHRM, March 22, 2022).
preferential treatment to employees who are closest to them physically. More specifically, “proximity bias is a mental shortcut that allows managers to make decisions about performance, promotions and hiring based on familiarity rather than objective criteria. The result is that decisions are based on biases rather than knowledge or data.”

Common examples of proximity bias include:

- **Evaluating** the work of onsite employees more highly than remote employees regardless of objective performance metrics.
- **Offering** the most interesting projects, assignments or development opportunities to onsite employees.
- **Excluding** remote employees from important meetings or failing to provide them with meaningful opportunities to participate in the discussions.

The SHRM article also cites to a survey of 10,000 white collar workers conducted by Future Forum, a research consortium created by Slack. The survey found that more than four out of 10 executives ranked the potential inequities between remote and in-office employees as their number one concern. Even so, the survey found that managers are twice as likely to prefer working in the office at least three days a week—and want their employees to be there, too.

The Future Forum survey (PDF) also found that:

- People of color, women and working moms continue to value location flexibility the most. In the U.S., 86% of Hispanic/Latinx knowledge workers and 81% of Asian/Asian-American and Black knowledge workers would prefer a hybrid or fully remote arrangement, as compared to 75% of White knowledge workers.
- Knowledge workers—and in particular, people of color, working mothers, and women—are thriving with the rise of newfound location and schedule flexibility.

The authors of the Future Forum survey concluded that “Leaders who hope to retain top talent and maintain diversity must act swiftly and deliberately to counter the forces of proximity bias. If they don't, they risk further entrenching structural inequality along racial and gender lines.” This concern is equally applicable to entrenching structural inequalities faced by people with disabilities.

The Future Forum survey cited in the SHRM article also noted that “to combat proximity bias and ensure equity between remote and in-office employees, leaders need to intentionally align on principles and guardrails that outline how the hybrid model will work at their organizations.”

Deloitte, in a blog titled “Creating a human-centric hybrid workplace: Effective hybrid strategy drives equity and connection” (November 2021) reached a similar conclusion: “By being intentional and including aligned leaders,
trained managers, and connected employees, organizations can ensure remote and in-person workers have access
to the same opportunities and feel connected to the organization.”

According to the 2022 McKinsey Report (referred to above), there is scant evidence of companies that have mastered the challenge of tapping the benefits of a more inclusive hybrid work culture. Companies are experimenting with solutions for adopting successful hybrid work models and addressing proximity bias. Examples of intentional strategies include:

- Executives need to set the example for the standards they want to uphold. Small actions can play a huge role in how safe employees feel when they exercise the decision to work remotely. One powerful signal is managers who model flexibility and support various work-life options.
- Leaders need to intentionally articulate principles and adopt guardrails that outline how the hybrid work model will work at their organization.
  - “Principles” ground an approach in core company values like inclusivity and equality
  - “Guardrails” guide behavior in order to maintain a level playing field for all employees e.g., by limiting the number of days per week that executives spend in the office or setting a meeting policy that “if one dials in, all dial in”
- Work hardest on institutionalizing research-based inclusion practices as part of the hybrid work model, particularly:
  - Work-life support
  - Team building
  - Mutual respect, i.e., demonstrating genuine concern for the wellbeing of all employees and commitment to treat one another fairly and respectfully
- Build awareness of the dangers of proximity bias and work with managers to develop internal policies on presence equity, i.e., the idea that every employee, wherever they are, is given equal priority and consideration.
- Build trust through transparent and effective communication and plan ahead and share information in advance.
- Get the technology right, including the design, procurement, use and maintenance of technology that is accessible to and usable by employees with disabilities.
- Provide equal access to networks for all employees, for example:
  - Mentorship programs
  - Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)
  - On-the-job “buddies” for new employees
  - Pairing virtual participants with in-person participants

---

7 Reports and articles highlighting strategies to address proximity bias include:
- Creating a human-centric hybrid workplace: Effective hybrid strategy drives equity and connection (Deloitte, November 2021)
- Hybrid Work: Making it fit with your diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy (McKinsey Quarterly, April 20, 2022)
- Making hybrid work for everyone (Deloitte, March 30, 2022)
- The Hybrid Work Model: A New Challenge for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (Forbes, May 5, 2021)
- Leveling the playing field in the hybrid workplace (PDF) (Future Forum, January 2022)
- Does Your Company Have Proximity Bias? (Reworked, February 2022)
- Proximity Bias and Hybrid Work: What You Need to Know (TechSmith, 2022)

8 See the “Resources” section of the policy brief, particularly resources under the headings “Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology (PEAT)” and “Job Accommodation Network (JAN).”
• Create a remote-first culture, e.g., promoting asynchronous ways of working by leveraging digital collaboration tools and turning online forums and virtual chatrooms into the “town square” of the company.
  o Make it clear that everyone’s input is welcome, and explicitly build in opportunities for those who are not physically present to contribute.
  o Leverage virtual meetings by retaining the virtual aspects of meetings, even when some are in-office. That means everyone join in from their computers.
  o Be intentional about checking in.
  o Be more visible when working remotely, e.g., turn camera on during virtual meetings.

• Equip managers for the hybrid landscape.

• Adopt practices targeted at remote socialization of organizational newcomers.

• Measure employee performance by output—focus less on time spend in the office or online and more on the quality and quantity of work.

**DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE HYBRID WORK MODEL**

In addition to intentionally addressing proximity bias, a hybrid work model must be disability inclusive. For purposes of this policy brief, the term “disability-inclusive hybrid work model” means a model that is deliberately and intentionally aligned (i.e., the adoption of policies, practices and procedures) with Title I of the ADA and implementing regulations.

People with disabilities should be provided an employment opportunity that is:

• Individualized i.e., decisions are made based on facts, objective evidence and science, not labels, stereotypes or generalized assumptions about the needs and priorities of people with disabilities (one size does not fit all).

• Genuine, effective and meaningful, i.e., reasonable accommodations are provided at the office or at the remote location (telework is a form of reasonable accommodation).

• Provided in the most integrated setting appropriate, i.e., the default, presumed and priority placement is with non-disabled peers.

Information and communication technology (ICT), such as websites, mobile apps and online systems, should be proactively designed, procured, used and maintained so as to be accessible to and usable by the greatest number of employees with varying functional needs, including employees with disabilities. An example is a company that proactively plans accessible and usable virtual events (PDF) for a diverse audience instead of reactively creating makeshift accommodations for a particular employee with a disability (recognizing that universally designed information and communication technology may still require individualized accommodations on a case-by-case basis).

Remote work is empowering for some people with disabilities; however, it is not the best fit for everyone with a disability.

• Some people with disabilities require remote work as a form of reasonable accommodation, regardless of the company-wide policy regarding remote work, absent undue hardship.

• Other people with disabilities benefit from and prefer remote work some of the time and work in the office other times, consistent with company policy applicable to all employees.
• Still other people with disabilities may prefer to work in the office all of the time, consistent with company-wide policy.

Some of the reasons a person with a disability may need (require) or choose (prefer) remote work include the following characteristics of remote work, which:

• Removes accessibility barriers regarding transportation
• Facilitates people with disabilities working from home environments that are already designed to meet their particular needs (have more control over their environment)
• Minimizes sensory overload and other stressors
• Helps remove distractions and avert associated interruptions to work or focus
• Reduces worrying about medical emergencies associated with disabilities (e.g., anxiety attack, bowel and/or bladder problems)
• Alleviates ongoing risk of infection for those who are immuno-compromised and concerns of people with severe allergies

Remote work can make life easier for people with physical disabilities, but does not always eliminate their need for other accommodations. Some people with disabilities may also need reasonable accommodations to make their remote workspace accessible and usable.

A person with a disability may chose not to work remotely or limit the amount of time working remotely for various reasons, including the lack of socialization. Working remotely can reduce interactions and can limit people from getting face-to-face socialization they might need or desire. Also, for some people with disabilities, the personal contact with managers and supervisors and peers, along with the provision of reasonable accommodations at the office, outweighs the desire to work remotely.

Organizations adopting disability-inclusive hybrid work models can deliberately and intentionally design and implement, among other things, the following policies, practices and procedures:

**Principles.** To create disability-inclusive hybrid work models, organizations may want to consider three main principles:

• **Clarity** in expectations and procedures
• **Universal design** in the creation of policies and the adoptions of practices and procedures that take into consideration the functional needs and abilities of the greatest numbers of employees (with the understanding that universally designed information and communication technology may still require individualized accommodations on a case-by-case basis).

**Policies.** To be disability-inclusive, organizations may want to consider adopting the following hybrid work policies:

• Explicitly indicating how policies apply to people with disabilities—for example, whether the policy is meant

---

9 The following articles provide information about the benefits of remote work for people with disabilities:
Remote work made life easier for many people with disabilities. They want the option to stay (CNN, August 10, 2021)
The Benefits of Remote Work for People with Disabilities (Inclusion Hub, March 22, 2022)
The Freedom of Remote Work for People with Disabilities (PCMA, September 1, 2020).

10 How remote work welcomes workers with disabilities (Remote, 2020).
to be inclusive of such people as written or needs to be modified—so that employees and managers better understand the policies.

- Requiring managers to clearly document remote work requests to ensure they are handled transparently.
- Allowing employees flexibility in acquiring and utilizing technology to provide them with proper equipment and better meet their needs.

**Agreements.** To be disability-inclusive, organizations may want to consider adopting the following terms and conditions of remote work agreements between the employer and the employee:

- Allowing employers and employees to customize particular aspects of remote work agreements, such as the schedule, location, duration, communication methods and means of securing and transporting equipment, to better account for a person’s unique situation.
- Indicating protocols to allow employees with disabilities who wish to do so to work remotely during emergency situations to mitigate additional challenges brought on by extenuating circumstances (such as traveling to the office during a storm).

**Management Strategies.** To be disability-inclusive, organizations may want to consider adopting the following management strategies related to hybrid work:

- Training managers around facilitating effective hybrid work models and promising and emerging practices, particularly related to supporting employees with disabilities who require remote work as a reasonable accommodation.
- Designating someone to coordinate and manage remote work accessibility and usability issues. Responsibilities may include:

  - Letting employees know that they can request disability-related accommodations for a meeting. Planners should be prepared to receive requests and know how to respond—employees may need presentation materials in alternate formats, sign language interpreters and more.
  - Getting familiar with accessibility features in virtual meeting software well ahead of the meeting. This way, organizers can share any necessary instructions on how to access accommodations—such as video of a sign language interpreter—before the meeting begins to avoid unnecessary hiccups during the meeting. If an employee is assigned a sign language interpreter or provided with captions during the event, planners should make sure that this assistance follows them throughout the meeting, such as into virtual breakout rooms.
  - Providing materials ahead of time to sign language interpreters and, if the captions are being written manually, to the professional captionist. Include names of presenters, key acronyms commonly used by the group and an agenda to ensure people using these accommodations do not miss out on any key information.
  - Making sure presenters discuss key content that is presented visually. With this approach, employees who can only join the meeting by phone or who have visual impairments can understand the information that is being presented visually.
  - Following up after the meeting. Meeting organizers should provide important links, resources and action items discussed during the meeting in accessible format.
  - Training information and communication technology support personnel on selecting and supporting accessible technology by considering universal design and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1) or higher standards in selecting technology platforms and how to trouble shoot assistive technology devices being used by employees.
RESOURCES

ADDITIONAL EARN RESOURCES

• Adopting an Integrated Telework Policy for Employees with and without Disabilities (PDF)
• Leveraging the Shift to Remote Work to Increase Employment of People with Disabilities (PDF)

EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION (EEOC) SUB-REGULATORY GUIDANCE ON TELEWORK

• What You Should Know About COVID-19 and the ADA, the Rehabilitation Act and Other EEO Laws
• Work at Home/Telework as a Reasonable Accommodation

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION (GSA) RESOURCE

• Integrating Accessibility into Agency Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA) Implementation Plans

PARTNERSHIP ON EMPLOYMENT AND ACCESSIBLE TECHNOLOGY (PEAT) RESOURCES

Hybrid Work and Telework and Accessibility

• Telework and Accessibility Toolkit
• Inclusive XR & Hybrid Work Toolkit

Elements of an Accessible Meeting Platform

• 7 Steps to Make Your Virtual Presentations Accessible
• Checklist for an Accessible Virtual Meeting & Presentation

JOB ACCOMMODATION NETWORK (JAN) RESOURCES

• Teleconference Accessibility and Hearing—Keeping Deaf and Hard of Hearing Employees in the Loop
• Make Telework Work