

Practice Brief:

Leveraging the shift to remote work to increase employment of people with disabilities

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced an unprecedented shift to remote work for a large percentage of the workforce in the United States. This included many occupations not commonly offered remote work arrangements. At the same time, people with disabilities lost work during the pandemic at a higher rate than people without disabilities. In part, this happened because more people with disabilities tend to work in the retail and hospitality industries where job losses were severe.¹ The sudden and massive shift in the way business is performed has revealed a path forward to the future of work, and could create new opportunities for people with disabilities.

The Workforce has Changed Permanently

According to a survey conducted in 2020 by the Conference Board, 74% of businesses surveyed reported that less than 10% of their workforce was remote prior to the pandemic. However, 34% of businesses surveyed now predict that 40% or more of their workforce will continue to be remote after the pandemic has subsided.²

Experts are predicting permanent changes to the workforce post-pandemic. This will necessitate changes to the way businesses recruit, hire, onboard, compensate and evaluate their employees. At least half of workers have said that they would like to work at home permanently, while 80% of employers surveyed indicated they plan to allow at least some remote work to continue as part of a hybrid work model.³ As employers adopt new flexible work arrangements, there is an opportunity to redesign HR processes in a way that results in greater inclusion and representation of people with disabilities in the workforce.

Strategies for Inclusion of Workers with Disabilities in the Remote Workforce

The shift to greater options for remote work has many implications for candidates and employees with disabilities.

- **Availability of talent.** The ability to conduct national searches for remote workers can broadly expand the available talent pool. It is also an opportunity to include more candidates with disabilities when recruiting and hiring.
- **Broadening of workforce partner networks.** Casting a wider net in the search for talent also creates the opportunity to expand workforce networks to include national and state level partnerships. More connections aimed at improving the talent pipeline can increase the number of [qualified candidates with disabilities](#) who apply for open positions.

- **New flexibility around conditions of employment.** The massive expansion in remote work options during the pandemic allowed companies to assess the effectiveness and productivity of [flexible work arrangements](#) in real time. Businesses learned that flexibility does not necessarily result in productivity losses, leading many companies to consider making some flexible work arrangements permanent. This may benefit all employees, but especially those who need flexibility related to a disability, medical concerns or caregiving responsibilities, ultimately increasing retention rates.
- **The scope and type of reasonable accommodations.** As workplace conditions change, so too does the need for [reasonable accommodations](#). While some employees may no longer require certain types of on-the-job accommodations, others may require new accommodations related to working remotely. Companies should review reasonable accommodation policies, procedures and procurement practices in order to prepare for this shift. Make sure that managers and employees are aware that remote employees can and should use the company process for requesting reasonable accommodations for home workspaces. Also, make sure that [telework policies](#) are inclusive of people with disabilities.
- **Creating (remote) cultures of inclusion.** As the workforce becomes more dispersed, establishing and maintaining desired workplace cultures will be challenging.⁴ This will also impact efforts to create [cultures of inclusion](#) that include employees with disabilities. Companies will need to devise strategies for engagement that help remote employees with disabilities feel a sense of belonging at work, and ensure that employees with disabilities feel their effort and input is valued. Ensuring that remote employees can participate in employee resource groups (ERGs), and that other benefits and privileges of employment are accessible to remote workers (e.g., perks, incentives and social opportunities) may help alleviate feelings of isolation and disengagement.
- **Self-ID considerations.** For companies wishing to encourage [voluntary self-identification](#) of disability, communication is a vital part of a strong self-ID campaign. The messaging regarding the importance of self-ID may need to change or increase in frequency, as a remote workforce may be less inclined to participate. This is especially true for individuals who have a non-apparent disability, and working at home has eliminated the need for a reasonable accommodation.
- **Retention and advancement.** Many managers and supervisors are learning to manage remote teams for the first time during the pandemic. As remote and hybrid work options expand to a greater a number of people in more occupations, new skills will be required to engage employees and evaluate performance in a manner that creates equal opportunities, and helps [retain valuable employees with disabilities](#).

Strategic decision-making in these areas of emerging workforce considerations can result in remote and hybrid workplaces that result in more representation of people with disabilities. Proactive planning is necessary to provide accessibility in virtual workspaces, and to ensure equality of opportunity for employees with disabilities working remotely.

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- i Smith, A. (August 28, 2020) A million people with disabilities have lost jobs during the pandemic. SHRM. Retrieved on April 18, 2021 from <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/employment-law/pages/coronavirus-unemployment-people-with-disabilities.aspx>
 - ii The Conference Board (October 2020). Adapting to the reimagined workplace: human capital responses to the covid-19 pandemic. Retrieved on April 18, 2021 from <https://conference-board.org/topics/natural-disasters-pandemics/adapting-to-the-reimagined-workplace>
 - iii Maurer, R. (February 8, 2021). What to consider when moving to a hybrid work model. SHRM. Retrieved on April 18, 2021 from <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/pages/what-to-consider-when-moving-to-a-hybrid-work-model.aspx>
 - iv Ibid.

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