COVID-19, Training and Advancing Employees with Disabilities: Findings from a Focus Group of NILG Members

EARN conducted a series of focus groups in the fall of 2021 with employer members of the National Industry Liaison Group (NILG) to better understand how the shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted onboarding, training and advancement practices, and the implications for candidates with disabilities.

The pandemic forced innovation, making it less likely that remote workers will be forgotten when it comes to opportunities for training and advancement. There has also been much progress in virtual onboarding, improving the process of welcoming and accommodating remote employees with disabilities.

Employers recognized that the needs of remote and essential in-person members of their workforce have diverged during the pandemic. Considerations related to training, rewards, compensation and promotion decisions had to be tailored to each group and ensure that disability inclusion was a factor in each operational shift.

“"It's not true that if you are home, you are forgotten about–it used to be, not so anymore. Remote [work] feels more participatory than it used to."”
- Focus Group Participant

Challenges

With such large numbers of employees suddenly working from home, training and onboarding functions were difficult to adapt at first. Employers experienced difficulty with:

- Participant engagement in virtual training sessions.
- Camera use.
- Affording the same flexibility and opportunities to both in-person and remote personnel.
- Ensuring digital accessibility of online training platforms.

Managers found that while remote participation in training came naturally to some employees, others needed extensive coaching in the areas of managing time, establishing work/life boundaries, and being willing to take on new assignments during an overwhelming time. Attention to employee mental wellbeing became a priority.
Managers had to take care to ensure that workers who were remote did not benefit from flexibility that would not otherwise be extended to on-site workers, and that remote workers were not overlooked when it came to professional development and advancement opportunities.

Technology presented challenges as well, particularly around the use of cameras in online spaces. For some, cameras can assist with visual communication, understanding and engagement. For others, camera use may exacerbate musculoskeletal problems, induce migraines or increase symptoms of fatigue.

**Solutions**

The innovations developed in order to conduct training virtually, and to evaluate remote employees for new opportunities, will likely remain post-pandemic. Employers found new ways to train and evaluate employees, eliminating the potential for remote employees to be overlooked in the future. Some solutions included:

- **Switching** to eLearning platforms with built-in metrics for evaluating employee results.
- **Using** chat platforms as a forum for questions, answers and reflections.
- **Assigning** single trainers to orient new employees to their workplaces/spaces and assist with accessibility or other accommodation needs.
- **Using** virtual platforms to review and analyze performance data.

Some employers added additional bias training related to COVID-19. For example, managers needed to be aware of the impact of Long COVID on performance, and employees needed to have information aimed at avoiding discriminatory or harassing behaviors related to COVID-19 infection or precautions.

**Future Considerations**

Employers noted that as training and development opportunities moved online, their participation numbers grew, allowing more employees to take advantage of opportunities for professional growth. This may be a particular advantage to employees who previously would have considered physical travel a barrier to participation. Post-pandemic training and professional development opportunities will likely be offered in multiple formats, including in-person and virtual. Pandemic innovations have allowed those opportunities to reach more employees than ever before, and may expand participation among employees with disabilities.
Learn More

**Practice Brief: Leveraging the Shift to Remote Work to Increase Employment of People with Disabilities (PDF)**
This brief explores how the sudden and massive shift in the way business is performed has revealed a path forward to the future of work and how this could create new opportunities for people with disabilities.

**Professional Development & Advancement of People with Disabilities (PDF)**
This guide highlights that a true organizational commitment to disability inclusion must include equal opportunities for people with disabilities to advance and grow.