COVID-19 and Remote Hiring of People 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 hiring practices, and the implications for job candidates with disabilities.

Participants described the need to make the transition to remote work quickly, and to innovate as they went along. For many, the shift to remote hiring occurred during a time of severe talent shortages when there was a lot of recruiting and hiring activity. This created an immediate need to assess:

- how pre-hire documentation could be completed in a confidential and accessible way;
- the availability and accessibility of technology for interviews; and
- the unintended impacts on candidates with disabilities.

"A small fraction of people did online interviews [prior to the pandemic]. We don't have a single framework for conducting online interviews— it has been difficult to make the shift."
- Focus Group Participant

Challenges

The sudden shift to remote hiring presented many practical challenges and involved some trial and error. As a result of experiences like this, employers realized the need to:

- Assess managers' comfort and familiarity with the skills needed to effectively interview candidates online.
- Improve awareness of remote accessibility considerations.
- Develop guidelines for use of technology and standardize interview platforms.
- Understand the differences in technology comfort/access of people applying for different roles.
- Consider the candidate's ability to access private, quiet space for virtual interviews.
- Avoid bias based on personal circumstances inadvertently revealed through the virtual interview process.

Employer experiences during the pandemic underscored the need to think proactively about accessible and inclusive remote hiring practices. One participant shared, when the organization asked candidates to record and
submit videos to answer predetermined interview questions, a deaf candidate returned a video of her responses using American Sign Language (ASL). The candidate's response was effective in making the employer aware of accommodations for deaf candidates, and the employer scheduled a virtual interview with an ASL interpreter present.

**Solutions**

Employers had to innovate solutions to remote hiring challenges in order to sustain critical business operations through the pandemic. Some solutions identified by participants included:

- **Providing** recruiting managers with a checklist for accessible technology considerations.
- **Providing** ASL interpreters quickly and easily whenever requested by a candidate.
- **Working** with candidates to provide solutions for comfortable and private interviewing methods and locations for those who lack those spaces. Utilize corporate space at other locations, or perhaps secure space (like a rented meeting room) for the candidate.
- **Eliminating** the use of videos as part of the hiring process.
- **Making** information about requesting accommodations for remote interviews clear and easy to find.

Because of these innovations, companies are reporting that they now consider the ability to source and hire remotely a competitive advantage, saving time, resources and expanding the talent pool to larger geographic areas.

**Future Considerations**

Focus group participants were unsure if pandemic-era changes will result in a total remaking of the American workforce. Without a clear commitment to sustaining new policies and procedures for the long term, participants were concerned that the benefits to people with disabilities that were realized in the rapid shift to remote work may be short-lived.

Employers also expressed the need to continue evaluating the effectiveness of virtual hiring. The need to periodically assess whether there are critical gaps in accommodation dialogues during remote hiring processes was also identified as critical. As workers return to physical offices, employers may need to renegotiate accommodations put into place for candidates hired virtually.
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.

**Adopting an Integrated Telework Policy for Employees With and Without Disabilities** *(PDF)*
This brief provides a framework for adopting an integrated telework policy applicable to all employees, including employees with disabilities.

**Hire (& Keep) the Best: Talent Acquisition & Retention Processes**
This webpage helps employers learn about effective policies and processes for hiring and retaining employees with disabilities.