

COVID-19 and Remote Work: 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 the shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, and implications for employees with disabilities.

The pandemic created conditions where the success of remote work could be implemented, tested, studied and refined as an option for employees in multiple roles across all sectors and industries. The lessons learned may result in permanent changes to the workplace, and may expand opportunities for people with disabilities.

Participants agreed that requests to work remotely or remain in person have been equally distributed among all employees. Employees with and without disabilities have circumstances and needs that are highly individual.

Challenges

The sudden shift to remote work presented many practical challenges. Employers described the need to:

- **Develop** virtual processes for work tasks traditionally performed onsite.
- **Ensure** digital accessibility of teleworking platforms and provide interpreters as needed.
- **Provide** support and training for employees who were struggling with remote platforms, in particular for employees who experienced new challenges related to the use of technology.
- **Revise** onboarding and training procedures.
- **Ensure** that organizational culture survives in “virtual space.”
- **Provide** access to disability accommodations and accessible technology in home environments.
- **Be** attentive to issues of mental wellness and potential feelings of isolation within the workforce.

“The last 10 months has caused some organizations to think about how we can be more flexible, but we know that we need to meet business necessity and ensure employee productivity.”

- Focus Group Participant

Many employees struggled to communicate with people wearing masks, or to participate in virtual meetings, reinforcing the need for accommodations such as captioning. For others, the remote work environment removed challenges such as the need to navigate physical spaces that were not accessible. Employers noted that depending on the type of disability a person experiences, remote work could be more of a benefit or a challenge.

Solutions

Employers were forced to innovate solutions to remote work challenges in order to ensure the ongoing productivity of all workers. Some examples included:



The creation of a remote work advisory group to look at telecommuting from an employee perspective. This group was charged with creating new remote work policies and recommending roles that could be eligible for remote work.



Employers in the public sector built upon processes for altered work schedules that had been used for other reasons in the past (e.g., staggered schedules as a means to reduce traffic congestion). There are now many government agencies implementing permanent hybrid work models due to its success.



Providing all employees with tablets and laptops instead of desktop computers. This strategy has benefits for remote work and ensuring that operations continue during other types of emergencies, like weather events.

Employers wanted to be sure that employees with disabilities had access to the support and accommodations they needed, when they needed it—even while at home. This led to a streamlining of the process for requesting and obtaining accommodations.

Future Considerations

The task before employers now is to find a way to “get back to normal” while acknowledging that things will never be the same. Many expressed the concern that forcing an employee back to the office who prefers to work remotely may cause resentment, and is likely to increase turnover in key roles as many choose to leave for jobs that may be done from home indefinitely. This fact has made remote work options a business necessity in order to attract and retain talented employees, including those with disabilities.

“You also need to think about mental health support—some may feel more depressed when isolated.”

- Focus Group Participant

“It was easier to send them home than to figure out how to bring them back.”

- Focus Group Participant

The lessons learned about work-life balance, stress reduction and mental wellness during the pandemic are likely to continue, strengthening efforts to foster workplace cultures in which the wellbeing of employees is prioritized.

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.

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