

Leveling the Playing Field Through Remote Work

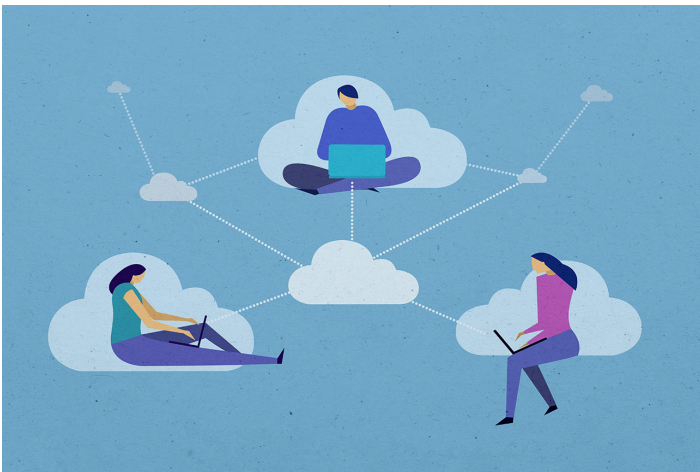
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The employment experience of working-age people with disabilities can only be described as challenging, complicated by countless barriers to accessibility and performance. Getting a job offer at all is a tall task. Employment rates for those with disabilities are roughly only one-third those for similar working-age individuals.¹ From the first interview, candidates are faced with a challenging decision: Is it better to disclose one’s disability and need for accommodations during the interview (and if so, at what point in the process) or hold back until after accepting the job offer?²

Legislation like the Americans With Disabilities Act has tried to create obligatory protections, but as the current employment rates show, it’s not a perfect solution. The law also leaves many areas open to interpretation, given that the accommodations requested must be considered “reasonable” and not cause undue hardship for the employer.

Before the pandemic, employers largely maintained that remote work was too cumbersome to allow, with some expressing concerns that individualized accommodations could be perceived as unfair to others. Working from home was rarely offered as an accommodation unless legally protected disabilities were documented.

But the global experiment of working from home, launched by COVID-19 nearly two years ago, changed that: Suddenly, everyone got sent home to work from whatever nook or cranny they could carve out, and heaven and earth got moved to make remote work work.

This shift to widespread remote work effectively leveled the playing field for some. People with mobility issues, for example, had the same chance to work as their nondisabled counterparts without having to face their usual hardships, such as having to arrive at the train station by 6 a.m. to access one of the few designated parking spots, or having to move on to another station if the elevator was broken.

Navigating Remote Work Needs

As more businesses look to a future in which decisions aren’t dictated by a pandemic, is working from home truly an accommodation, a “nice-to-have” perk, or a basic requirement for a fully functional employment landscape? Now that the dam’s been cracked, there’s no patching that hole. Employment is evolving, and not just for those with

disabilities. Employers need to take note of a few considerations in figuring out when and how to navigate these changes.

1. Quantifying and classifying disabilities is not a yes-no question. While there are protocols for diagnoses, documentation, and legal protection, in truth, many people consider disability a continuum rather than a clear division between “you are” or “you aren’t.” Furthermore, abilities are not static but ever changing. As the universal experience of aging shows, while one’s eyesight or balance might be perfectly functional right now, there could come a day when access to workplace accommodations is required to meet changing needs. The opportunity to craft a job to suit an employee’s comfort and preferences removes a lot of red tape while also providing access to every talent pool at every point in time.

2. Disability is not the only pain point of physical presence at work. Remote interactions with colleagues diminish the likelihood of an employee with a disability being subjected to comments like, “That screen is huge. You must really be blind!” But home can be a more comfortable, less distracting work environment for those without disabilities as well. Consider the Future Forum’s recent finding that Black employees are **more likely to request a continuance of working from home** compared with White workers. It also found that absent any **microaggressions or daily reminders of otherness**, employees find working from home all the more appealing. In fact, it showed an increase in Black workers feeling fairly treated overall in their jobs and reporting incredibly low rates of wanting to return to the office.

On another front, traditional American business culture is strongly oriented toward an **extroverted personality**, where everyone is supposed to be cheerful, greet colleagues and exchange pleasantries, and be entertaining and even funny whenever possible. During meetings, the person who wins the day is typically the most eloquent speaker — the one who knows how to interject and take the floor (or, failing that, is simply loud enough to claim the spotlight). Working from home can allow introverts to truly revel in the joy of missing out, where even brainstorming — long thought the purview of noisy interactions — can better thrive. ³

3. Flexibility improves people’s lives. The pandemic has vividly highlighted common work-life stressors, such as the difficulty some parents face in managing their work along with child care or elder care responsibilities. This period has also demonstrated the significant benefits of reduced commuting times — including the individualized convenience of the “10-second commute” and the environmental benefits of having fewer daily commuters overall. ⁴

People have gotten a taste of these freedoms, and at this point nearly all previously office-based employees state that **at least some flexibility for when and where they work** is a priority from now on. Eight hours a day, every day, at a desk in the office does not seem like the way forward for most. Companies that resist the shift to remote work options will face the sting of employee resignations, as increasing numbers of people figure out how to work for themselves or get scooped up by other employers offering greater choice.

This isn’t to make light of the challenges of offering flexibility and hybrid arrangements. Does there need to be a critical mass of people present in the office at certain moments — and, if so, when? How much face-to-face time, if any, is required to do a job well? To what degree can each individual choose suitable work arrangements for themselves? These questions force us into the new frontier of job design.

While remote work arrangements can benefit many, the experience of people with disabilities is a prime example of how inflexible work design limits access to capable employees. The way forward is twofold: first, to understand what each job is and what success looks like, free of the common bias toward in-person face time; and second, to remember that one size doesn’t fit all. In fact, one size fits almost no one. As they manage “the inaugural members of the world’s first **truly digital workforce**,” employers now have the chance, if not the responsibility, to provide access to all workers in ways that optimize their employment.

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