Employers for Change
Employer Disability Information Service

Open Doors
Creating Work Opportunities For All

The Future of Work and Disability
- A Remote Opportunity

Report by Employers for Change and The Open Doors Initiative

Prepared by Joan O'Donnell | NOVEMBER 2021

Positive2work
Skillnet

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Acronyms

AT	Assistive Technology - umbrella term covering the systems and services related to the delivery of assistive products and services[1]
BAU	Business as usual
CES	Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities
D&I	Diversity and Inclusion
EAP	Employee Assistant Programme
ERG	Employee Resource Groups
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
HR	Human Resources
IT	Information Technology
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
UN CRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities
VUCA	Volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous
WSS	Wage Subsidy Scheme
WFH	Working from Home

1 - World Health Organisation definition: (Online, accessed 4 Oct 2021).

Glossary

Hub Working: where an employee works from a hub close to or within their local community. This includes co-working, which involves attendance at a co-working space where collaboration and networking outside of one's team or organization is encouraged[2].

Hybrid working: working from different locations: home, on the go, or the office.

Leverage points: places in complex systems, where a small shift in one thing can produce a large change.

Reasonable Accommodation: where an employer makes a change to the tasks or structure of a job or makes changes to the workplace to allow the employee with a disability to fully do the job and enjoy equal employment opportunities[3].

Remote Working: organising and/or performing work, using information technology away from the employer's premises on a regular basis, where work which could also be performed at the employer's premises[4].

Systems convenor: a role held by an individual or a team that takes a wide view of the whole employment landscape as well as the practices needed to create a learning environment to improve the inclusion of disabled people in work. Convenors create space for conversations across boundaries. These boundaries may be across different departments within an organisation or across different organisations, government departments, employer bodies, disabled workers and/or disabled peoples organisations or service providers. A systems convenor holds enough legitimacy to work across different contexts and levels in the best interests of the entire system[5].

Working From Home (WFH) or homeworking: an employee is working from their house, apartment, or place of residence, rather than working from the office. The Irish government issued guidance to work from home during the pandemic unless necessary to attend in person.

2 - Ibid.
3 - Citizens Information (Online, accessed 4 October 2021).
4 - Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment (2019) Remote Work in Ireland, Government of Ireland
5 - Wenger-Traynor, E., Wenger Traynor, B. (2021) Systems Convening: A crucial form of leadership for the 21st century, Social Learning lab, Portugal (Online, accessed 4 October 2021)

Foreward

Living through a pandemic has given both employers and employees an opportunity to consider how and where we do our work. Pre Covid-19 remote working was a notional idea that was feared by many employers. However, it provides greater flexibility in how people do their job, something which can be of great benefit to people with disabilities.

Employers for Change and the Open Doors Initiative were delighted to partner with Positive2Work Skillsnet on commissioning this research to examine the impact of remote working during Covid19 on people with disabilities. We would like to thank Joan O'Donnell whose passion and experience was key to the creation of this research paper and the resulting leverage points. The employers and employees who participated in this research gave us great insight into the barriers and opportunities which arose throughout the pandemic, in the context of remote working.

It is clear from this research that providing an option to hybrid or remote work is more attractive for many disabled people and can remove barriers such as transport or allow for greater flexibility around working hours.

However, it is important that disabled employees are involved in conversations around company policies and remote working policies that will affect them. After all, diversity is inviting everyone into your organisation but inclusion is ensuring a true sense of belonging by allowing people to contribute to your company's direction and policies.

Connectedness was a theme running throughout these workshops and there was a conflict at times between people feeling more and less connected because of remote working during Covid19.

Providing remote work or hybrid work opportunities should not leave disabled employees isolated from the rest of the workforce and it is important that this be presented as an option for the individual as opposed to a solution or alternative to providing accommodations. It is important to understand that our work environment needs are not automatically met in our home environment.

There is much learning still needed in the area of disability inclusion especially with remote and hybrid working still being a relatively new practice.

This research lays out a number of leverage points which are based on these principles of connecting, learning and accommodating. Employers for Change and The Open Doors Initiative will take these learnings and engage with employers to ensure that we are addressing the needs of employers and employees with disabilities.

We hope that more employers will engage in our service to bring disability to the fore of the Diversity and Inclusion agenda within their organisation and indeed society as a whole. After all inclusion benefits everyone.

Christabelle Feeney
Director of Employers for Change at The Open Doors Initiative

Jeanne McDonagh
CEO, The Open Doors Initiative

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unexpected opportunity to accelerate structural changes in the way we work. Continuous advances in technology and Assistive Technology (AT) enhance the range of work that people can do outside the office environment, making working-from-home (WFH), hybrid or remote working a realistic option as never before. It can now be a realistic and attractive option for some disabled workers who seek greater flexibility, the ability to better manage disabling conditions at home or who wish to avoid the need to navigate public transport. As a result, remote working increases the pool of available talent to employers and supports retention of workers who acquire a disability during their working life.

The work environment is set within a fast-changing world, sometimes described as 'volatile, unpredictable, complex and uncertain' (VUCA). Employers and employees alike are constantly adapting to changes and disruptions and increasingly challenging markets.

Policies to support disabled people to participate in work are guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UN CRPD) – signed by the Irish Government in 2007 and ratified in March 2018 - and implemented through a wealth of legislative instruments (Equality Acts 1998- 2015, Disability Act 2005), and the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for people with Disabilities 2015-2024 (CES).

Despite all these measures, Ireland has the lowest employment rate of disabled people in Europe[6 7]. Recent research by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2021) reports that employment policies have underperformed[8] and research by Eurofound (2021) concludes that the CES is both unambitious and unable to address the complexity of the environment[9].

6 - The European Commission country Report for Ireland 2019 (online, accessed 4 Oct 2021) revealed that Ireland has one of the lowest employment rates for people with disabilities in the EU (26.2 % compared to 48.1 % in the EU in 2017).
7 - Patrini, V., Ahrendt, D., (2021) Disability and labour market integration: Policy trends and support in EU Member States, Eurofound.
8 - OECD (2021), Disability, Work and Inclusion in Ireland: Engaging and Supporting Employers, OECD Publishing, Paris, (Online, accessed 4 October 2021)
9 - O'Donnell, J., Schmidt-Abbey, B. (2021) Living conditions and quality of life: Integration of people with disabilities into the Open labour market: Irish case study, Eurofound (Online, accessed 4 October 2021)

Two reports issued in September 2021 point to the timeliness of this report: the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) identify a need to understand the experience of disabled people in work and an OECD report prioritises the need to engage employers to build a better world of work for persons with disabilities. This research forms the start of a fresh conversation about how we conceive of, and design diverse and inclusive workplaces for the future.

Employers and employees both bring a wealth of lived expertise to contribute to this societal conversation in equal measure. The pandemic has fuelled workers' appetites for working from home[10] with a strong preference for a blend of office and home-based work, and the right to work from home is set to be established in Irish law.[11] Legislation needs to make provision for Article 27 under the UN CRPD which commits Ireland to enacting changes that recognise the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others.[12] Embracing inclusive employment practices and accessing this untapped pool of talent has documented benefit for employers: disabled staff tend to have higher retention rates and lower incidents of absenteeism, can be more productive and efficient than peers, can enhance company image and increase market share.[13]

However, it is also important to recognise that remote work does not necessarily offer a solution for inclusion and accessibility in the workplace. In other words, it is not a simple "fix" for what in reality is a complex issue. Research in the UK[14] and US[15] suggests that disabled workers were more likely to be in precarious jobs, unsuited to remote work prior to the pandemic. Remote working, therefore, is not a way to sidestep the obligation to make work environments accessible or to ignore the need for inclusive employer practices.

When the task of creating more equitable and inclusive work environments is understood in its full complexity, it becomes clear that no one stakeholder, policy or intervention can effectively "solve" the issue. That being said, remote and hybrid working does offer a new opportunity that must be exploited to the full, in the interests of greater inclusion. The task ahead requires complexity-sensitive approach that supports all stakeholders to learn and collaborate across silos, including policy makers, industry partners, NGOs and disabled employees.

This report brings the voices of both employers and employees with disabilities together following the sudden shift to working from home (WFH) prompted by Covid-19 experienced since March 2020, in order to better understand how best to make the most of this new emerging remote working opportunity.

10 - Forsa.ie (Online, accessed 4 October 2021)
11 - Oireachtas.ie (Online, accessed 4 October 2021)
12 - UN.org (Online, accessed 4 October 2021)
13 - RobertWalters.ie
14 - Holland, P., 2021. Will Disabled Workers Be Winners or Losers in the Post-COVID-19 Labour Market?. Disabilities 1, 161–173.. doi:10.3390/disabilities1030013 (online, accessed 4 October 2021)
15 - Schur, L.A., Ameri, M., Kruse, D., 2020. Telework After COVID: A "Silver Lining" for Workers with Disabilities?. Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation 30, 521–536.. doi:10.1007/s10926-020-09936-5 (online, accessed 4 October 2021)

Research Design

The purpose of the research is to initiate a conversation that can inform the future design and practice of remote working for disabled people in Ireland. The research sought to bring to life the experience of WFH from the perspective of employers and employees with disabilities, in order to identify leverage points for future policy and practice development. Leverage points are places in complex systems, where a small shift in one thing can produce a large change.

It was designed on the basis of the following assumptions:

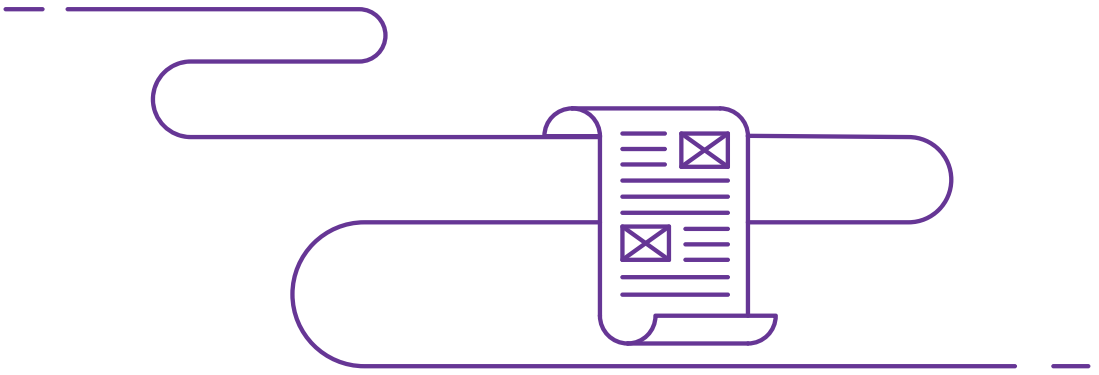
1 - All situations are characterised by **multiple and often contradictory perspectives**, where no one person can see an entire situation or hold "the correct view". In other words, where participants hold contradictory viewpoints, this does not make one right and the other wrong.

2 - Different **issues are inter-related**, and interventions can often create unintended consequences elsewhere that are not immediately obvious. While the focus of this research is specifically on the experience of home working during the pandemic, it is acknowledged that work was not the only concern people experienced.

3 - The importance of setting **boundaries around the issue to be explored is necessary from a pragmatic perspective, and at the same time also an artificial choice.** This research focuses on creating and understanding of what is happening within the employer and employee space, as experienced by different participants and actors, and identifying actions that can be taken to improve employment practices, whilst recognising the wider systemic structural policy changes that also impact on outcomes for disabled workers.[16]

16 - The research also recognises the importance of government policy and how it shapes the employment landscape which IBEC and Employers for Change address in a complementary report

Three workshops were facilitated by the researcher between April and June 2021 along with staff from Employers for Change. The first workshop was held with employers (n= 9), the second with employees (n=12) and the third with both employers and employees together, where they explored their reactions to the contributions to the first two workshops (n=10). Participants were drawn from large multinational, national and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), state agencies and not for profit organisations operating in Ireland. All workshops were of two hours duration and were held and recorded on Zoom. All participants consented for the workshops to be recorded and notes were taken using Miro Software. Thematic analysis was used to analyse and interpret contributions.[17]



17 - Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative research in psychology, 3(2), 77-101.

Findings

The analysis paints a complex picture of three inter-related themes relating to WFH that together form a coherent system of supports:

Connecting: the sense of connectedness, or greater isolation and/or mental health issues and visibility associated with working remotely

Accommodating: having enough autonomy over work space and time management and access to appropriate technology as reasonable accommodations

Learning: the need for learning across three levels: personal learning, management learning at an organisational level and leverage points at a macro level.

All three factors are interconnected and interdependent upon each other for success (see Diagram 1).

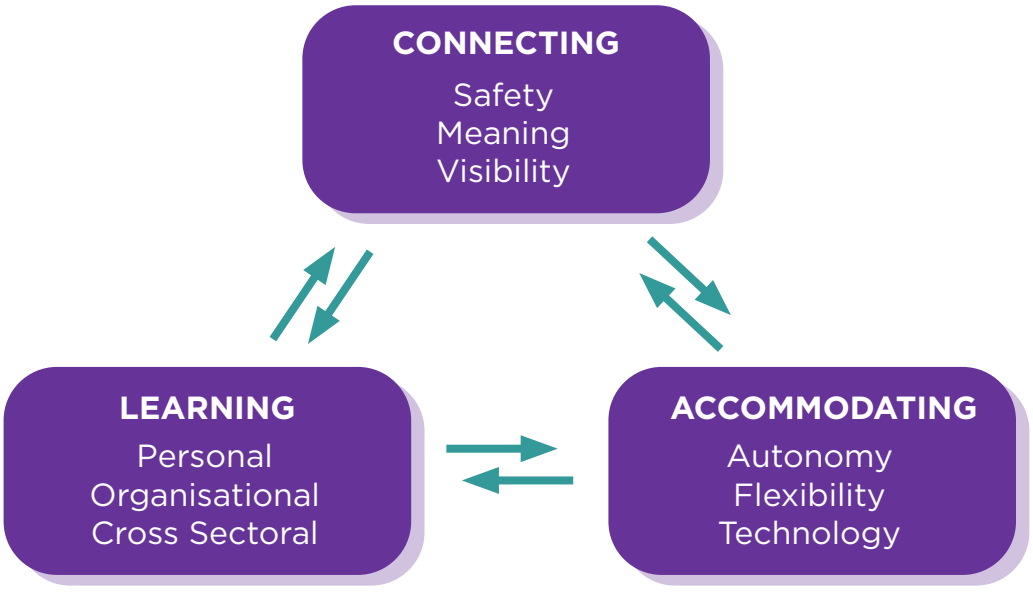


Diagram 1: Connecting, Accommodating and Learning as three interrelated factors contributing to the experience of WFH for disabled employees

3.1 Connecting

The experience of staying connected and included in the workplace during the pandemic was mixed for everyone. Some found they became more connected to colleagues at a human level than they were previously. For others however, the experience led to a greater sense of isolation and mental health issues.

Working from home led to new levels of connection:

Greater understanding of each other's life context: Work could not be separated from the experience of living through a pandemic, with all the stress and uncertainty that that brought with it, including the need to care for others, whether they were disabled or older family members or children now home during school closures. Being able to see into the reality of each other's lives and personal context and being seen, was experienced as life enhancing.

Enhanced appreciation of each other: It helped people shed some of their 'work personas' and enhanced their openness. Both employees and employers spoke of a new opportunity for deeper connections and fresh conversations that included, for example, sharing information around hidden disabilities and the enabled the repair of fractured relationships.

More opportunities for Remote inclusion: Connecting remotely brought a new level of transparency into interactions: people were less likely to speak over each other and geography was no longer a barrier to inclusion. One participant with a disability, who started a new role during the pandemic, reported feeling included and connected in a within a team that they had yet to meet in person. Meeting online also helped people connect to others in parts of the organisation they were unfamiliar with and hear news about colleagues they might not otherwise meet.

Reaffirming the importance of work: The importance of purpose and belonging at work was highlighted with disabled employees speaking of the struggle to secure their place in the world of work. People with intellectual disabilities in particular had fought hard to secure jobs, and where over time the role was adapted to suit their abilities. The sense of belonging they described spoke to a reciprocal relationship between employer and employee, where each benefited and the disabled person's unique contribution to the company was appreciated. Staying connected to colleagues and work was critically important for their wellbeing. Those whose roles meant that they were not able to work remotely, experienced the loss of connection which impacted on their sense of purpose and mental health.

EMPLOYEES REFLECTIONS

Because of the nature of meetings online people are not talking over each other and they're using proper turn taking, cues like putting up the hand, whereas when we had a physical staff meeting I would usually sit at the head of the table to see people's faces and yes, people were conscious to try and not talk over one another but sometimes it just wouldn't be possible - there would be two or three people on the side having small conversations. But because we're in an online format where it's 2D, no one can have little side conversations, so I find it much more accessible.

I missed out on what was going on in other people's lives like finding out that somebody was expecting a baby, or someone wasn't well, things you get to know about in the office. I only found out last week that somebody got a new job at Christmas. If we were in the office, we would be on the ball on things like that.

I was unemployed for about seven months... I kind of derailed...not having that purpose, or that passion, that fire in my belly to go to work - I found it so hard to find employment. It was so hard like you wouldn't believe, and I fought so hard to get work.

EMPLOYERS REFLECTIONS

Meeting online smoothed out a lot of wrinkles that had built up over years as people realised we are all human.

We have a lot of parents and caregivers of people with disabilities, and I think we've been very mindful of the challenges that they've had in terms of home schooling and the lack of structure and uncertainty. So whilst they're not our employees we've been very mindful of the impact on the disabled community and the knock on effect on our employees.

We have an employee on our team with a disability when we're in the office she would be talking to everybody... when we had to work from home she found it extremely hard, she really struggled not being with people all the time, so we just made sure we had daily calls with her, and made her aware she could call also at anytime. When we were in the office we could see if she was getting overwhelmed with the work because sometimes it would get a bit too much. It's hard when we're not with her to see when that's happening. So we go through her work and prioritise it.

SUSTAINING MENTAL HEALTH AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Mental health was the first concern for employers. Everyone was affected by the pandemic including staff who had not presented with mental health issues before. Employers were aware that isolation was a particular issue amongst disabled staff, who might rely on the social space in the job for their primary social interactions. They were also concerned that it was difficult to see if a disabled staff member was overwhelmed or struggling to manage their workload. This sometimes led to a greater amount of time in one-to-one meetings between managers and staff. They moved swiftly to enhance supports but found there was poor take-up of Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP), mental health seminars, courses to combat Zoom-fatigue, and operational health checks. They struggled with how to create better safe spaces, when staff were not availing of supports already in place. Training managers on mental health was considered a priority, as they were in direct contact with staff who might need support.

Employees on the other hand expressed frustration that EAP programmes are often phone based and therefore not accessible for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Staff also experienced a double-bind in attending well-being courses where they were being advised to take regular breaks and look after their mental health while simultaneously being pressurised to complete work on time.

Work life balance was also an issue. Disabled employees who found WFH enhanced their productivity under normal conditions, were now finding that it was taking longer to complete core work. This may have been due to the extra time people spent sustaining connection with each other, but it is also difficult to separate the reality of WFH long term from the experience of living through a pandemic. All staff were working extra hours and in many cases swopping commute time for work time, just to complete core work. Zoom fatigue was also common. These two issues point to a need to pay attention to work-life balance issues when devising remote work protocols for the post-pandemic period.

EMPLOYEES REFLECTIONS

Speaking as a person with a hearing impairment, a lot of the mental health supports, such as the EAP is not accessible for me... it is not and never has been accessible for people who cannot use the phone.

Employers need to give a little more encouragement and show that they see breaks as important instead of holding a wellness session where employees are just told what to do.

We've had no guidance, no advice on how to deal with working from home. For example when I was in the office I would always have a break at 11:00 o'clock and take lunch at 1:00 o'clock. That doesn't happen at home, I only take a break when I remember to take a break. We need support around minding ourselves as well because when you're at home you get caught up, there's less temptation to get up from the desk.

I've had a lot of people coming to me to say they prefer working from home because in the office they have to wear masks that adds an extra barrier to communication - so they didn't get the benefits of working in the office, it actually made it more stressful for them to go into the office where they have to wear the mask. We're in negotiation with employers to see if they could use a shield instead of a mask but shields are not as safe as a mask and we can't compromise on employee safety

EMPLOYERS REFLECTIONS

Before it was about whether someone with a disability needs a reasonable accommodation or workstation assessment or whatever, but now we are seeing more and more mental health side of things becoming so much more prevalent.

I think people are we're just finding BAU and getting their core work done takes like longer and a lot of people have replaced the fact that they don't have the commute with giving the company that extra hour in the morning and the evening.

We added a service for employees around mental health to combat some of the zoom fatigue and to be honest - the take up has not been what we thought it would be...I think people are just about keeping the head down getting the core work done.

VISIBILITY OF DISABILITY

There was a shared sense amongst employers that disability inclusion was foundering amidst the prominence of other equality concerns including race and gender, despite investment in Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) networks and Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) around disability. This situation was exacerbated by the pandemic, which contributed to further invisibility. It was difficult to recruit members for ERGs while working from home, where involvement took time from completing core work. The focus on mental health also had the unintended consequence of making other disabilities more invisible. Employers suggested that it may have led to situations where managers and support programmes missed critical intelligence they needed to support the wellbeing and productivity of disabled staff.

Employees felt visible when they were included in the design of online meeting spaces and less visible when they were not consulted or considered in the design of work practices. They were frustrated when they were not asked what reasonable accommodations would support them to be productive, and this impacted on their working relationships with managers.

They also considered it important that inclusion measures take a nuanced view to balancing 'ability' and 'disability' messages, without ignoring either, in promoting disability inclusion. This requires candid discussion around the reality of being disabled in a remote working world where only a small part of each other is visible on the screen.

Even within the context of a deepening connection between staff, there was a concern that disclosure of a disability, which is an ongoing issue in workplaces, was harder during lockdown. Employers were also conscious that organisational culture did not always encourage disclosure. They considered it the need to raise awareness of disability across all levels of the organisation and encourage disclosure and positive identification of disabilities as a priority. Employers also sought greater focus on inclusion alongside other diversity issues at a strategic level. They pointed to a need for leadership to be driven from the top so that resources and attention could be directed towards disability inclusion.

EMPLOYEES REFLECTIONS

If employers could see a person for their ability rather than their disability and rather than saying you can't do this and, oh no, you can't do that - it's rather saying, 'Okay, here's an opportunity, do you want to try this out?' and people prove themselves in that situation, just like everybody else.

What I've noticed working with people with intellectual disability is that sometimes it takes that little bit longer to learn things, but once they've learned things, they don't unlearn them.

Positive imagery is really important, the disability is really important, seeing the disability alongside the ability...that message can often get lost, and people think it is about seeing the ability not the disability... and I'm going 'definitely see the disability' and see what can be done with the ability along with the disability'.

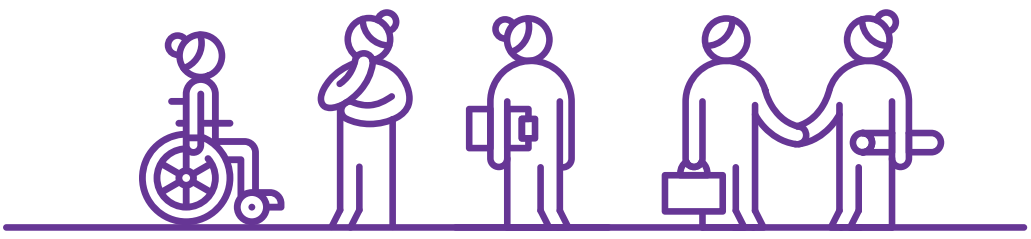
EMPLOYERS REFLECTIONS

Business as usual has become a top priority so there's less resource available for the D& I networks over the last year. And I think a little bit of this is the lack of visibility of being in the office too, where you have posters in the lift and around the canteen about events that are coming up and you can walk around and talk to people. So the visual element is lacking we're really struggling to recruit committee members for the disability network to progress our agenda.

Prior to the way we're working now a lot of our events would have happened in one or two central offices. So if you weren't in Dublin city centre you couldn't attend events. So now it's great because we've got people who can attend events that are in Limerick or Cork. I agree that there is total fatigue - everyone is just getting their job done - but it would be a disservice to ourselves if we don't use having remote way of having events to be able to reach out to more people, it's something we need to think about more as we go forward.

3.2 Accommodating

There was general agreement that WFH created fresh opportunities for reasonable accommodation in the workplace. Some employers wanted to capitalise on the opportunity presented by remote working to recruit more disabled staff, but the challenge of doing so was further exacerbated rather than helped by the pandemic. They felt they were not “disability confident” and sought an A-Z of recruitment practices including the need to train managers to recruit inclusively. They also identified a gap in state supports aimed at encouraging inclusive recruitment, particularly in supports for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Employees felt that remote working should be a standard reasonable accommodation.



EMPLOYEES REFLECTIONS

Remote working should be a reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities. Some people may not be in a position to physically go somewhere or commit to be somewhere because of their disability, for example chronic fatigue or being reliant on public transport.

Digital accessibility and an audit of company policies and procedures important for everyone - having proper navigation, proper headings on word documents and making sure training materials are accessible so anyone starting work in a remote environment is able to follow the structure.

There was also a bit of pressure to prove you could do as much work if not more from home just to prove that you could work from home at first anyway there was an awful lot of pressure and I do think that was a barrier.

EMPLOYERS REFLECTIONS

We have lots available we have reasonable accommodations, we have processes in place for recruitment, we have work station accommodation and there's actually practical toolkits but I'm not sure that the general management population are aware of them.

If someone came to me through the recruitment process and they had a disability I would not have known that there were toolkits and a process in place for me to be able to assist them starting at the interview process I would probably have went 'oh God that's going to be really difficult,' if we could educate managers on the ground, they would be educating their teams and a lot more people would be aware.

We need to create a space for them to succeed without having to say 'this is an employee with a disability', but rather saying 'this is an employee that we need to put supports around'. We need to be really clear, really understanding what are the barriers to success. And as an employer we are responsible to remove those barriers.

Enhanced Autonomy and Control

The greatest benefit that disabled employees cited about WFH was the autonomy it gave them over how they managed their disability. Being at home meant it was easier to move around more freely to deal with stiffness or pain, or manage lighting and noise levels. It was also easier to control work times to deal with fatigue and to concentrate at home than in a busy office where they had less control around interruptions and the level of contact they had with others.

EMPLOYEES REFLECTIONS

As a wheelchair user I'm glad I'm able to get out of the chair every so often. I'm able to sit down on the couch for maybe 5 minutes and that's great because sometimes when I'm at work all day I get very stiff and it's painful.

The isolation wasn't an issue for me personally, I didn't mind. I was able to get a lot more work done from home without a lot of interruption.

I've lost count of the number of times maybe on a Friday I get a text message 'oh can you hang on for a bit we just need to get this done', so I end up doing all those extra hours on top of my contract I would like to see some kind of framework about agreed hours and flexible time if it is available.

Prioritising when its ok to be at meetings remotely and when it's important to do it in person so that when it's not important to do it in person is really important, especially for people with disabilities not to be under pressure to get somewhere physically sometimes.

I find it easier to work at home because I can adjust the lighting to suit my own needs. You can't do that in an office where fluorescent works best for everyone, but I would have had things like migraines because of how my eyes process the light.

EMPLOYERS REFLECTIONS

It took a while before people were comfortably set up with the big screen or the second screen they needed- I spoke to one person who said they went and bought their own stuff because they just really absolutely needed that chair because of their disability they couldn't use the kitchen chair like I would.

Enhanced Functionality and Access To Technology

Technology played a major role in the transition to WFH for everyone as it made it possible for many location based jobs to be done remotely. It played an even greater role for disabled workers: it was not just the means through which they could do their job and stay connected, it also created a more inclusive and accessible work environment than being in the same location often did. Many employees used bespoke combinations of Assistive Technology (AT) in addition to mainstream technology. Benefits included the following:

Enhanced accessibility: It was now possible to avail of close captioning, listen back to recorded meetings, and have easier access to remote sign language interpretation more easily as everyone was meeting remotely and the accessibility features of meeting platforms were being continuously enhanced by tech companies.

Enhanced equality: It helped create a more equitable environment to participate in work events: everyone occupied an equal space on the screen and often this diverted attention away from visual cues of disability and helped reframe a focus on ability and getting the job done. One person said they no longer need to sit at the "front of the class" at conferences near the interpreter and could control the volume in meetings.

Enhanced opportunity to design work environment: Disabled employees were able to devise individual and novel ways of using mainstream technology alongside AT to suit their individual condition such as using multiple screens to aid sign language interpretation.

Enhanced transparency: The speed with which online platforms became increasingly accessible over the course of 2020 also introduced a new level of transparency in interactions: people tended not speak over each other when using online platforms and there were no sidebar conversations, beyond the Chat function, which enhanced a felt sense of being more included amongst people with vision impairments and hearing loss.

Technology also brought a new set of issues:

It was too easy to call meetings at short notice and this left little time for advance preparation.

Where problems arose with technology, **it was also more difficult to get or give effective IT support remotely**, and this was exacerbated further for those with learning disabilities or dyslexia for example.

The Right to Disconnect which came into force in April 2021 was seen as important to manage stress and expanding work times.[18] A lack of clarity about organisational expectations and core working times could also be a source of stress, leading to a call for policies clarifying parameters for core and flexible working times.

18 - www.Workplacerelations.ie (Online, accessed 4 October 2021)

Getting access to the technology that people required was not always easy. Both employers and employees spoke of the time lag in accessing technology at the start of the pandemic. Slow procurement processes caused delays that in some instances, resulted in staff self-funding what they needed to make their work environment accessible including the use of personal mobile phones. Some employees had taken out loans to cover the cost of their AT.

There were also misconceptions around AT. Some employees expressed concern that employers saw their obligations differently around remote working compared to the office environment. This included assumptions that they would have all the accommodations they need at home and would not require anything additional, or that AT would be prohibitively expensive, when small adjustments or inexpensive AT was required.

Employees expressed concern that the specific role that technology played for them was not well understood by employers, and that it was something they still had to fight for. For example, platforms had different accessibility features, yet organisations often favoured a particular platform without considering accessibility and there were often assumptions that a Sign Language interpreter was not needed if Close Captioning was provided. There was also an assumption that AT should work seamlessly with internal IT systems which were thought to be accessible when they were not. As time goes on and the pressure to return to business as-usual (BAU) increases, employers were concerned that organisations are reverting to practices and technologies, without consideration of accessibility issues.

Employees sought a change of mindset not just with employers, but also across government, stating that the Reasonable Accommodation Fund operated by the Department of Social Protection was no longer fit for purpose and the fact that it excluded government agencies from accessing it was problematic for public sector employees. The expense of AT that people were already paying for from their personal income also meant that they were unable to afford holidays or pursue further education opportunities. They sought funding that would follow the person, rather than be specific to a job, and asserted that they were the expert in their own disability and wanted to be consulted in a meaningful way and asked about what they needed.

EMPLOYEES REFLECTIONS

I have a hearing loss and I knew I was missing a lot of what was being said at meetings and I did bring it to the management's attention, and nothing was ever done about it. But since working from home, they've provided captioning for me for meetings... it's the first time since I'm working there that I feel like I know everything that's going on.

We had a lovely presentation last week where they went on about all of the supports that are available for people, but none of it is provided by captioning - it's all by telephone...I think during the pandemic we all need a little bit more support and that's just not there for people with hearing loss.

Working from home and using VPN software to access the work server has been a bit of a challenge particularly using Jaws, which may not work in the internal system so the IT issues are more prevalent really and the department can't just go out to your house and look at your computer and figure it out like they would in the office.

Before COVID you might have a meeting that you would know about a month or two weeks in advance and now meetings get scheduled quite quickly which is fine and understandable but the ability to meet the demand has been difficult at times.

Small wins like having accessible documentation knowing in advance what's coming up, scheduling is hugely important. There are small things that can be done to support people with dyslexia, providing minutes for meetings in advance, knowing that if that if that person has to speak or talk, they can mentally prepare... some accessibility options for being able to record team meetings as well and have a transcript really helps too.

Sometimes on Zoom calls I'm asked oh we have captioning would that be enough and I feel no I want uh an interpreter I'm fluent in sign language, captioning can be hit and miss for me.

Getting access to the office environment that took a long time to set up. So basically, we had to use our own personal emails, phones and equipment.

Initially management did not want to use Zoom calls because of a concern over security and confidentiality which was understandable, they wanted to use Microsoft Teams. For me, Microsoft Teams did not work so well especially when I'm dependent on an interpreter. If somebody is sharing a screen you can't pin the interpreter and the presentation.

EMPLOYERS REFLECTIONS

At the very beginning we used Zoom and then we rolled out new products internally which I don't think works quite as well. And people ask can I do Zoom calls over using our internal tool. And I just wonder, now what we started to do becomes business as usual if some people who may require as different supports might be forgotten over time, whereas at the beginning everyone was kind of like, what does everybody need?

We need a structured hybrid working model that each employer could fit around their employees although it wouldn't just be around disability, - I would be still included in the workplace when I'm there and still have the learning that goes on in the workplace, the ability to socialise with my colleagues. If I was given core hours for my days at home and fit the rest of the hours outside of that in a way that suits me and it's up to me to manage.

We were told we need you in the office as we are a service provider, and then we had a nice balance of working two days a week in the office and three days a week from home. When that kicked in, I began to enjoy working from home a bit more.

We all have lives outside of working and I think hybrid technology working with a structure of, you need to be in the office these particular days or you have your core hours I think this is something each employee should be encouraged to look at.

I worry that if we amplify recruitment efforts in supporting diverse talent coming into the organisation, I worry how well we could support them working from home.

Diversity and inclusion is so important to us but I don't think we have put enough focus into thinking about accessibility across all our programs, whereas I think now this hybrid model will offer even wider scope for involvement around disability. I want to keep this issue on top of mind for everyone because a lot of the time we talk about diversity hiring around race and women but I think focus we need to push on is it diversity around disability and what that means.

3.3 Learning

Workshop participants highlighted the need for collective learning and leadership to make remote working a sustainable option in the long term. There was an expressed need for renewed learning around disability across all levels of the system and across different stakeholders. While disability awareness training may form part of a training response, there were concerns that it alone would not be enough to gain the attention of top management, or generate more inclusive recruitment and employee support processes, including a shift in D&I attention towards disability. Employees would like to see organisations engage and accessing specific supports from disability support organisations with expertise around different disabilities.

PERSONAL LEARNING

All staff missed the tacit or informal learning that happens incidentally by virtue of being in the same space as others during the working day. It was difficult to replicate this online: it was no longer possible to turn to a colleague and ask a quick question, and difficult to see when someone was busy and know when it was a good time to pick up the phone for an informal chat. Instead, contact became more formalised via scheduled meetings. Employers expressed a need to learn how to create alternative safe spaces for informal learning.

EMPLOYEES REFLECTIONS

I was sharing an office with my team, and very much part of the conversation. We all shared knowledge, we'd all go for lunch together and we'd learn about each other and what we were doing to build a better relationship. When remote working came in that kind of incidental learning was gone.

I started a brand new job even though I did a handover I'm still missing certain things, general things that you would get no problem in the office.

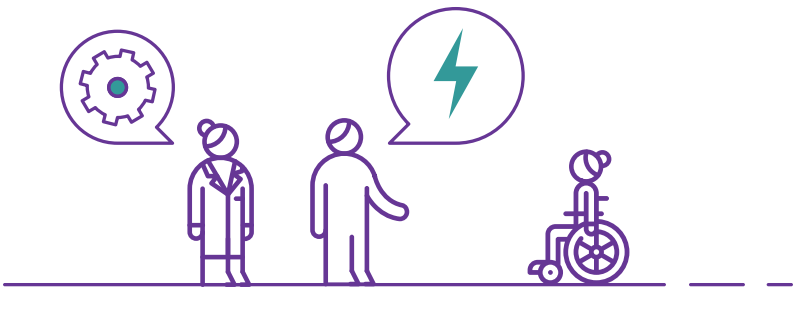
I can't pop into a colleague's office on top of that quick chat about something it's now either email tennis or an instant message tennis or a quick phone call and I don't want to assume they're not busy and I'm conscious that oh I'm the new guy I can't be ruffle feathers and I'm only in the door.

EMPLOYERS REFLECTIONS

I think it's important to engage with all staff regardless of whether they have a disability, and would encourage that space where if you do have a disability and you are little worried about going back into the workplace and you feel that you can manage your disability better from home, employers do need to reach out to staff.

Organisational Learning

Employers pointed to the need to train managers to understand how disabled staff can contribute to the organisation as well as raise awareness of the toolkits already in place to support them. This included moving beyond default job descriptions and crafting job specifications with inclusion of disabled people in mind. Many organisations are currently caught in a downward cycle: they needed to train managers to effectively support disabled staff, and yet the absence of disabled staff meant this has not been prioritised or meaningful, which has led to a lack of confidence in recruiting and supporting disabled staff. As a consequence, disability remains invisible, and organisations struggle to turn this into a virtuous cycle: where increased confidence feeds inclusive recruitment which in turn feeds organisational capacity and numbers of disabled employees. One employer made the case for awareness training, regardless of the current employment levels of disabled staff, on the basis that it can also lead to current staff getting a diagnosis for conditions they have lived with for some time.



EMPLOYEES REFLECTIONS

Given all the technology changes over the last year, that have led to a change in policy and procedures, I think it's very important that employees should be allowed to input into policies and procedures presented by employers. I have been lucky enough to be asked to be involved in policymaking in my work and that's because I made most noise about it - I was the one who was saying it wasn't working for me.

I think we need to change the mindsets of a lot of workplaces because individuals need to fight their case with the company to put assistive technology in place. It isn't this big, massive beast they need to tame they might think it is - allowing recording policies in meetings for example or using Livescribe pen for taking notes and even allowing the use of quiet spaces for using text-to-speech and speech-to- text applications.

In some places they throw you a kit and say 'off you go' and they kick you out of the nest off into the real world. And that's really horrible and horrendous - when there's no dialogue -when it isn't working and it causes more stress than it's worth. I wish there was an avenue open for dialogue and that feedback.

EMPLOYERS REFLECTIONS

I'd be really curious to ask people how attractive are we as an employer for folks with disabilities - I can't answer that. I don't know and I think that's the first question. The next piece is how much do we prepare and support them and their leaders to be successful. These are questions to take back to my organization. It starts at the top.

Tone and strategy does come from the top: we are massively engaged in the D&I agenda it's just that there's no engagement around disability.

What we really need - and I can't deliver on my own - is a kind of an A to Z road map that goes from sourcing talent to advertising jobs, how the spec is written, where it's advertised, to - do we have a defined and communicated process around supporting people in terms of reasonable accommodation at the interview process? We do this when it's needed, but we don't have the processes or the people you need to talk to defined. And we don't train our managers on it. How can we recruit and hire if we're not a disability-confident organization and if it's not normalized as part of our BAU?

Cross Sectoral Learning

Employers sought collaborative peer learning spaces across organisations in addition to internal capacity raising, expressing a need to avoid reinventing the wheel to develop inclusive recruitment practices. As WFH, hybrid and remote work is embedded into the design of work, all policy frameworks need to be inclusive, from recruitment to reasonable accommodations and ongoing supports. There was agreement that no one organisation can tackle the learning alone and an appreciation of the potential of learning together, and sharing experiences as well as resources and providing mutual support.

EMPLOYEES REFLECTIONS

The national remote working strategy doesn't address flexible working, so for people with disabilities or who have caring responsibilities, remote working is a little bit narrow for us so we're hoping for a national flexible working strategy where you would have the right to request it.

I know some people with disabilities ordinarily wouldn't have thought of themselves as being able to meet the demand of office work. If they have the ability to be productive in a certain role working remotely that should be seriously considered now by employers...but that employers don't look for people with disabilities solely to work from home either... it's a needs-and-must scenario and so that it's still seen that people with disabilities who can work in the office around the road can do that as well.

I would love to see funding that follows the person to give them the supports that they need to work because from personal experience, because sometimes it can take weeks or months to get the technology we need to do our job and I've seen this happen to other people too because they wait until you actually dare to ask or find out about what you need that could get you in before the job and say OK this is what you're going to be doing and what do you need so on the first day you're not at a disadvantage and you're not feeling like a spare wheel, which has happened to me.

EMPLOYERS REFLECTIONS

I very much believe in the power of partnerships and I'm not convinced that organisations can make the changes on diversity alone. We have to collaborate across organizations either within sectors or more broadly than that using platforms like Employers for Change. I wouldn't like to push too much focus on measuring the success because I don't think we can make change without collaboration.

One thing that could be powerful is leveraging the collective of everyone on this call and resources that are available from a government level perspective. I would like to progress some of those how-to guides, what's the best practice around supporting a person with a disability in the interview process as an example. It would be useful to get information on resources that are already available.

Coming from a small company, we really don't have any visibility of what's available, or how people could become available to us, or how we could go about finding people. The government agencies don't reach out to people like us.

4 - Discussion

The workplace of tomorrow will take a different shape from the one that we knew. For those jobs that do not rely on a place-based activity, it seems clear that a hybrid of office and home-based work will continue for time to come. The workshop conversations added depth and texture to an already complex issue and make it clear that the flexibility of remote working can provide opportunities for greater inclusion than before, but only if done well. It is also the case that out of sight may well mean out of mind, and come at a huge cost to disabled workers, if they become invisible within their organisations. This points to a need to create the conditions for connecting, accommodating and learning as both targeted actions as well as an ongoing process that is primarily relationship-based.

4.1 Connecting

The single greatest surprise of WFH was the extent to which working relationships and connections could be developed and sustained remotely. It is likely that the shared experience of living through the pandemic fostered a heightened sense of connection and openness and will need a sustained effort into the future. Over a third of disabled employees reported that they did not feel connected to colleagues prior to the pandemic[19] and it seems likely that connections improved for many, but it is also likely that other disabled employees suffered disproportionately from isolation and mental health issues while WFH during lockdown.

Employers sought to address issues around mental health, Zoom Fatigue and the extra time people were spending doing their core work, including giving over what would have been their commute times. However, the supports put in place could be described as a "fix that failed[20]": something designed to help which took attention from the root cause of disabled employee's reported reasons for stress. Disabled employees also agreed that mental health was an issue, but they were more concerned with addressing core accommodation issues such as access to assistive technology and sought clear policies around the right to disconnect and flexible working times to alleviate stress levels. They sought consultation and communication that would work towards trust and connectedness between them and their employers. Creating positive connections is a necessary precursor to psychological safety which can be described as a work climate which encourages employees to speak up and take risks in an atmosphere of respect and trust. It is a felt sense of safety that cannot be produced in training activities, but when present in a work environment can enhance wellbeing and productivity. Psychological safety[21] is a good predictor of an employee's

19 - www.robertwalters.ie (Online, accessed 4 October 2021)
20 - Fixes that fail - Wikipedia (Online, accessed 4 October 2021)
21 - Friedman, R. (2014). The best place to work. New York: Perigee.

productivity, ability to self-manage[22] and likelihood that they will seek out knowledge from colleagues[23] by crossing boundaries beyond their immediate team. People feel safer in teams where mistakes are permitted and there is a commitment to continuous learning. Managers need to invest more time in understanding the personal circumstances of disabled employees, especially with the lack of visual prompts online both for those with visible disabilities and invisible disabilities (e.g. mental health, epilepsy, hearing loss etc).

Visibility of disabled staff is an ongoing issue: it affects promotion prospects as well as recruitment. Employers expressed a strong desire to increase the visibility of disabled people in their organisations but had little clarity about how to move forward. Some employers found that the D&I strategy was left to the ERGs to push in addition to their core work. Disability inclusion needs to form part of dedicated core work to avoid it becoming an extra burden on an already stretched workforce unable to find time to commit to D&I networks or ERGs.

Employment is important to sustain health, income, relationships and social status for disabled people[24]. However, with reference to the increased risk of isolation of disabled staff working remotely, it must be noted that inclusion is not reliant on being co-located. It is possible to feel lonely in a shared office space as much as it is to feel connected in a virtual space. The issue is more strongly related to how organisations go about creating the conditions for inclusion and belonging by modelling and rewarding inclusive behaviours and systems.

Going forward, it seems likely that sustaining disabled workers remotely requires organisational reflection on what worked well during the pandemic and the deliberate design of spaces and processes that can capitalise on learning so far. Communication has become more critical to success, but it is quality rather than quantity of communication that marks the difference between communication that promotes better self-management and productivity and that which can deflate motivation and take up unnecessary time[25]. Both employers and employees will need to invest in the relationship and focus on what happens between them rather than rely on externalised support mechanisms. It is an ongoing process rather than a one-off event that needs to happen in core work time. There are many methodologies for developing dialogical spaces such as, for example Bohm's Dialogue groups where multiple points of view are given space just to be[26], Appreciative Inquiry processes[27], or Theory U[28] processes that can sustain connectedness. But that connectedness must bring about practical actions including reasonable accommodations and also feed into wider learning within the organisational system and beyond.

22 - Edmondson, A.C. (2019) The fearless organization: creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation and growth. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons.
23 - Burrell, E., Brauner, E. Knowing and sharing: Transactive knowledge systems and psychological safety. Organisationsberat Superv Coach (2021). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11613-021-00722-7 (online, accessed 4 October 2021)
24 - Ibec.ie (Online, accessed 4 October 2021)
25 - Marlow, S. L., Lacerenza, C. N., & Salas, E. (2017). Communication in virtual teams: A conceptual framework and research agenda. Human Resource Management Review, 27, 575–89.
26 - Bohm, D. (1996). On Dialogue (L. Nichol, Ed.) (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203180372
27 - appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu (Online, accessed 5 October 2021).
28 - Presencing.org (Online, accessed 5 October 2021)

4.2 Accommodating

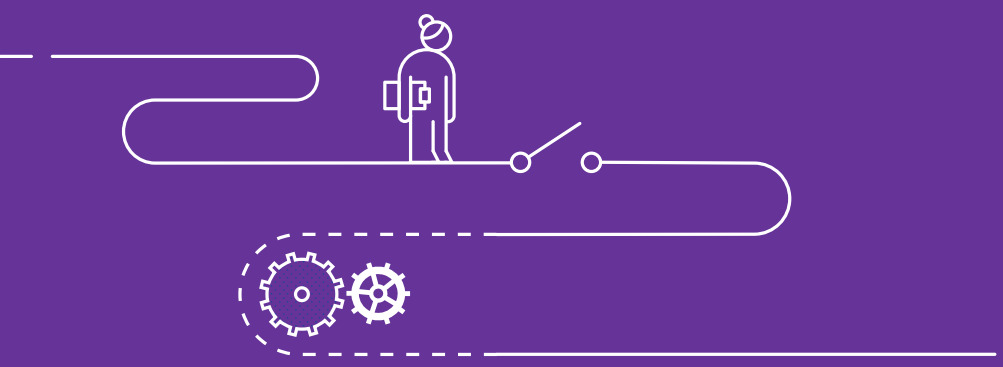
The advantages of working from home are a game changer for many people with disabilities for two primary reasons: workers have greater autonomy and control in their home environment and greater accessibility in the technological environment. These are indicative of some of the reasonable accommodations that disabled workers often seek, but have been more difficult to secure, and less well understood, prior to COVID19. Those with medical conditions that put them at high risk are understandably nervous of being reintroduced to a shared work environment. Whilst the right to work from home is being introduced into Irish legislation, it remains to be seen if it will also be regarded as a reasonable accommodation on the grounds of disability. At the same time, it cannot be used as a reason to sidestep making workplaces accessible.[29]

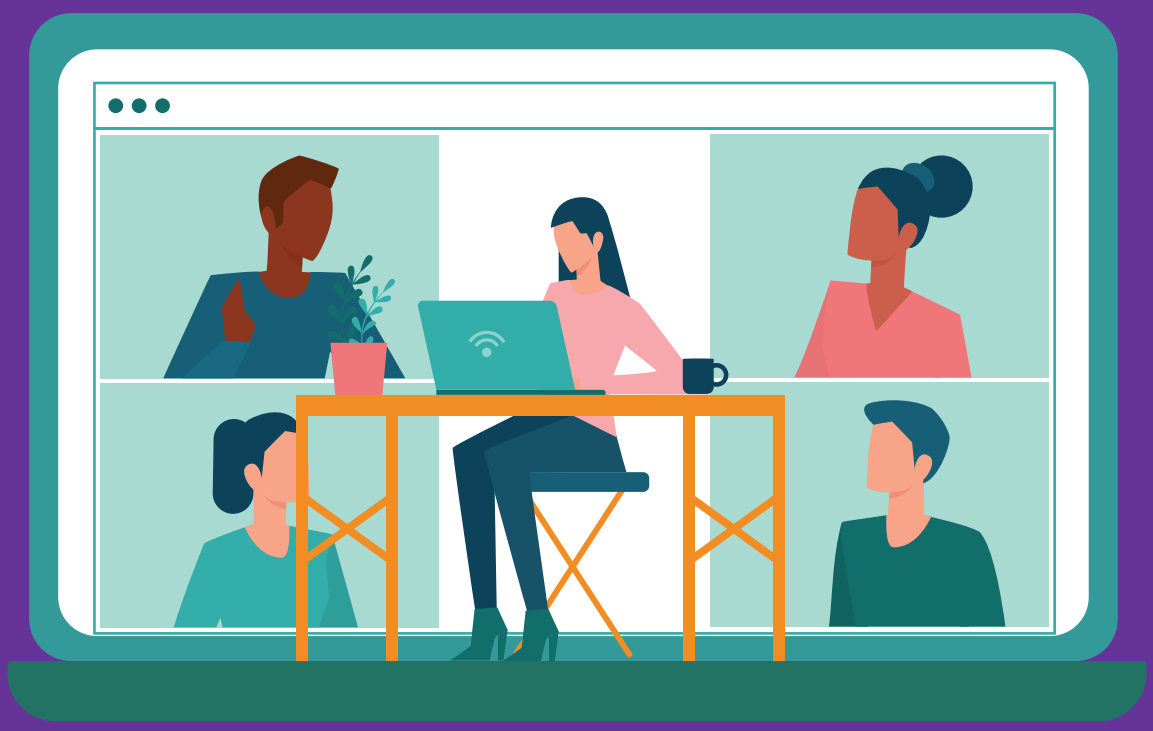
All staff need technology to work from home, and many disabled people need additional Assistive Technology (AT). The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines Assistive Technology as the systems and services related to the delivery of assistive products and services. There was a palpable knowledge gap in the workshops between the understanding that employers had around AT and the degree to which disabled staff rely on it. This needs to be addressed through internal awareness raising alongside renewed state policies that create an AT Passport and AT ecosystem[30] including funding mechanisms that can emphasise user control and keep speed with the rate of technological advancements.

Work is shifting from being a place to go to, to being about what employees do. It is time to move away from default job descriptions and performance review processes that may bear little relationship to what a person does. The stories of successful inclusion relayed in the workshops spoke to the unique value that individuals created in their organisations, that could not be predicted in a precooked job description. This was also echoed in a call to shift from deficit-based finding schemes to ability focused supports.[31]

Accommodating disabled staff to work remotely requires continuous learning across different levels of the system as work shifts in line with changes in legislation, technology, and individual circumstances.

29 - https://www.thejournal.ie/tgip-working-disabilities-5416871-May2021/ (online, accessed 4 October 2021).
30 - O'Donnell, Joan; Long, Siobhan; Richardson, Pierce (2016): Assistive Technology for People with Disabilities and Older People: A Discussion Paper. figshare. Online resource. https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.11808273.v1 (online, accessed 4 October 2021)
31 - The Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) available to employers for disabled staff refers to making up for disabled peoples' "productivity shortfall" https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/employment_and_disability/grant_aid_scheme_for_employers_with_disabled_staff.html. (online, accessed 4 October 2021)





4.3 - Learning

The pandemic prompted speedy innovation and improvisation: this is in line with research that suggests that we are at our most innovative at the early stages of change, before routine sets in.[32] However, there are some indications that the focus on accessibility is waning with the development of inaccessible in-house communication platforms and the return of old patterns of communication. Disabled workers are the experts in their own lives and want to be part of the conversation guiding reasonable accommodations. Organisations do not feel disability-confident, and though positively engaged, are often unsure of their ground. Employers were very much committed to greater inclusion of disabled staff and had more questions than they had answers, viewing the workshop as a start point for learning.

The pace of change in the external environment is too fast to develop static policies and in-house solutions which then "fix" the problem. Employers cannot afford to alienate disabled talent any more than strategies and funding mechanisms can afford to fall out of step with the shape of work and the speed of technological advancements. There are also real risks associated with remote working amongst disabled people: it may accentuate social inequalities as it suits well paid jobs that demand high levels of education, while jobs that are location dependent such as care work, retail, manufacturing and deliveries are less paid and more precarious[33]. While disabled staff are currently more likely to work from home and many may benefit from doing so, their potential is nonetheless constrained by home working[34]. Compared to on-site work, workers with disabilities doing home-based work also face slightly larger wage gaps relative to workers without disabilities.[35]

Given the complexity of the issue and the various stakeholders involved, forums that foster collective and continuous learning are well suited to ensure competing concerns have space. There is a need to learn forward together, in a way that remains current with the changing environment, legislation and the demands of the market.

Learning needs to happen across three levels (see Table 1). Firstly, keeping staff authentically connected to one another requires listening and learning about the kind of spaces that can sustain and foster greater psychological safety in organisations and sustain the level of connectedness that developed during the initial stages of the pandemic. Managers are critical to creating the conditions for enhanced connections within teams and holding one-to-one conversations around individual circumstances and needs.

Managers also require training alongside a clear organisational commitment at CEO level to creating the conditions for greater inclusion and accommodation of disabled workers as they need to interact with other parts of the organisation to ensure that the right supports are put in place e.g. HR, IT etc. This points to a need for collective learning within organisations: dynamic practice that produces knowledge across boundaries, through the creation of

32 - Weick, K. E., & Roberts, K. H. (1993). Collective mind in organizations: Heedful interrelating on flight decks. Administrative science quarterly, 357-381.
33 - McKinsey.com (online, accessed 4 October 2021)
34 - Schur, L.A., Ameri, M., Kruse, D., 2020. Telework After COVID: A "Silver Lining" for Workers with Disabilities?. Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation 30, 521–536.. doi:10.1007/s10926-020-09936-5
35 - Ibid.

open spaces where different stakeholders can learn from each other, share knowledge and resources. Commitment to learning needs to be part of the core business of organisations, and there may be value in identifying Systems Convenors[36] within management roles with specific responsibility to identify opportunities and convene learning conversations across boundaries. Rather than providing fixes, systems convenors enable learning across boundaries, bring broader views to local settings and connect people so they can find local solutions and enhance their knowledge. This role is key to distributing learning across the organisation in a way that raises the organisation's capacity to create inclusive workplaces.

Last but not least, there is also a need for a broader learning space to increase the learning capacity across organisations and other stakeholders. A Systems Convenor at this level must have enough legitimacy to convene conversations across different contexts and understand the interrelatedness of connecting, accommodating and learning across all levels of the employment landscape. They also need to have the capacity to support leveraging change within the wider system.

Table 1: Collective Learning across system

Disabled Employee – manager and team	- Negotiating reasonable accommodations - Managing workload - Sustaining connection and inclusion within team
Organisational learning	- Reasonable Accommodation policies - Raising capacity across disciplines to recruit and retain disabled staff
Across organisations and wider stakeholders	Collective learning across boundaries to inform individual organisations, share information and knowledge and influence policy

36 - Wenger-Traynor, E, Wenger Traynor, B (2021) Systems Convenors https://wenger-trayner.com/systems-convening/ (online, accessed 4 October 2021).

5 - Leverage Points

This report identifies the following key leverage points that can – if taken together – contribute to improving the participation rates of disabled people in the workforce by making remote work a viable option. Recommendations are interrelated and are designed to leverage *connecting, accommodating and learning* across the system.

CONNECTING

1 - Create an open space for a new and sustained conversation to sustain connecting amongst all staff with a specific focus on including disabled employees

Managers need CEO support to create the conditions for enhanced connections within teams. Keeping staff authentically connected to one another requires the creation of an open reflexive space, that builds on the experience of WFH during the pandemic for listening and learning together about how to foster and sustain greater psychological safety and connectedness. Critical question include: what features of the WFH practices could be retained and developed in more deliberate and considered ways? What practices can alleviate the level of isolation often experienced by remote disabled workers?
Learning together is the long-term sustainable route to learning and becoming disability-confident organisations.

2 - Enhance visibility of disabled people in the workplace by creating placement opportunities and work sampling that enhance connection and learning

An effective way for employers and employees to know if a job is a good fit for a disabled jobseeker is to create opportunities for job sampling, or job shadowing for new job recruits or those returning to work after an absence. Remote working needs to be considered as part of the suite of options available in the Access Employment Programme for people with disabilities, which subsidises paid work placements for up to 6 months or the Work Experience Placement Programme, allowing the jobseeker to retain their full benefits for the duration of the fixed term placement. The Department of Social Protection could also target and support SME employers to become offer opportunities to disabled jobseekers.

ACCOMMODATING

3 - Develop reasonable accommodation policies that enhance autonomy of disabled staff to manage their workload alongside clear guidance of expectations

Develop policies and practices in consultation with disabled staff around remote working that include provision for reasonable accommodations, supporting them to manage their condition. What rights do employees have to request remote or hybrid working as a reasonable accommodation? Every person is different and needs to be able to negotiate what they need with their manager. Expectations also need to be clear and negotiated to avoid unnecessary stress arising from ambiguity. Managers must be well equipped to have these conversations with disabled staff, and this should be normalised into the standard employee experience.

4 - Develop processes for inclusive recruitment processes, including crafting job descriptions that can be adapted for remote working

Jobs no longer need to be done the same way they always have been. Many traditional job descriptions were likely to discourage disabled applicants who have a preference for working remotely. There is an opportunity now for employers to reimagine how roles can be filled, including how they can be performed remotely

5 - Develop policies and training to support better understanding of, and access to Assistive Technology

The role of Assistive Technology as a reasonable accommodation needs to be understood throughout the organisation eg. across managers, IT departments and HR. Developing training resources on accessible and assistive technology in conjunction with the Department of Social Protection and not-for-profit AT service providers will support the development of a coherent AT Passport and ecosystem of supports that can traverse both home and work life.

LEARNING

6 - Develop Systems Convenor roles within organisations to support learning across organisational disciplinary boundaries

Many issues relating to reasonable accommodations and becoming disability-confident organisations involve sustaining multiple relationships between disabled employees, management, IT and HR functions. Nominated people acting as systems convenors can work across boundaries advocate and share learning within different parts of the organisation, assess learning needs and consistency of reasonable accommodations agreed with disabled staff within different teams.

7 - Convene an Employers Forum to enhance cross-system learning amongst employers and the wider system of supports

Continuous learning amongst employers is key to becoming disability-confident and developing the expertise to support disabled staff to become a vital part of the remote workforce. It is important for creating a safe space for employers to stay connected and raise their collective capacity without reinventing the wheel in their individual organisations. It requires a Systems Convenor with legitimacy with employers across all sectors, such as Employers for Change to host such a space.

8 - Develop a Campaign to raise the visibility of disabled people in the workplace and enhance organisational learning

A national campaign is required to raise awareness and understanding amongst employers around employing people with disabilities. The campaign should be conducted over multiple media platforms and raise greater awareness of the state supports available. It is important that the campaign aims to normalise disability in the workforce rather than take a 'heroic' stance.

These leverage points focus on actions aimed at employers and employees and they also have wider policy implications for national policy and government support schemes. Together, they embrace the need for continuous collective learning across all levels of the system which is a precursor to systemic structural reform that can match continuous changes across the employment landscape.

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Positive2work

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Employers for Change

Employer Disability Information Service

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Creating Work Opportunities For All

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