



# TOP TIPS: AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO SUPPORTING YOUR WORKFORCE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

*This publication contains new insight and advice on how employers can take an inclusive approach to managing and supporting employees in the current climate.*

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a widespread shift to home working, changed caring arrangements for much of the workforce, as well as the need for many businesses to make difficult decisions to save money. These factors demand that employers take an inclusive approach to working practice and culture.

Business in the Community (BITC) has identified four areas that require attention from employers:

### 1. Take an informed and people-centred approach to the crisis

Most of the workforce will experience increased levels of stress and anxiety at this time. At a leadership level, acknowledgement that individual experiences of the COVID-19 crisis will be different depending on financial security, overall health, domestic arrangements, demographics, etc. Seek to:

- **Clarify expectations.** Uncertainty is a breeding ground for anxiety. Worries about job security could add to rising levels of 'presenteeism', such as working while unwell. In addition, remote workers during normal times are at higher risk of

burnout<sup>i</sup> <sup>ii</sup>. Set organisation-wide expectations on any changes to business-as-usual plans, internal communications channels and working patterns. Productivity will be impacted by all that is going on and give your workers permission to slow down.

- **Offer appropriate support.** Managers should consider holding regular check-ins, covering a wider scope than usual. For example, items to address include mental wellbeing during this time, any changed caring responsibilities (such as sick family members) and any home-working challenges. Those employees that needed reasonable adjustments in the workplace, for example, an employee with auditory impairments who may have previously relied on a hearing loop, might now need more subtitles or other special equipment. Understand all additional support needs employees may have, such as providing technical training to use remote-working technology. Ensure company-wide support is reaching those who need it. Consider widening access to employee assistance helplines to include contract and non-permanent workers.





- **Foster informal connections.** In normal circumstances, remote working is known to carry a higher risk of employee isolation. The wider lockdown will exacerbate this. Maintain and foster networks or events that enable colleagues to connect with one another outside of working hours. Virtual 'watercooler moments' can be varied. For example, allowing more time for check-ins at the beginning of meetings and encouraging virtual pizza parties, where teams come together and 'share' food while video conferencing. Senior management should role-model taking time out to convene and participate in non-work focussed activity such as this.
- **Assess policy decisions for their impact on different groups.** From furloughing staff to deciding which functions should remain on the front-line, consider and mitigate any disproportionate impact on demographics such as black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) employees<sup>iii</sup>, as well as the individual needs of vulnerable workers, such as pregnant employees. Health and financial crises tend to have a skewed impact. Early research has found that low-paid women and workers aged under 25 are more likely to work in sectors that have been shut down<sup>iv</sup>.

## 2. Ensure the basics are in place

At a leadership level, recognise and highlight that not everyone will have had a smooth transition to home working. In many organisations, there will still be significant numbers of staff working on the front-line (who may have mixed feelings about this) and that this new model is one that organisations are still developing.

Where possible, take a flexible approach, reflecting individual circumstances and that the situation is still changing. Consider the following:

- **Space.** The UK has record high levels of overcrowding in both private and public

accommodation<sup>v</sup>. Consider what physical space and quiet environment employees have access to, and any changes they may need to make to their hours and broader responsibilities.

- **Facilities.** The shift to home working happened rapidly. Therefore, do not presume all employees have the appropriate set up. This includes equipment, such as display screen equipment appropriate for long-term use, or facilities such as comfortable working locations and necessary resources, such as fast wi-fi. Those employees that required reasonable adjustments in the workplace may need to rethink what these might be at home.

**Costs.** Alongside potentially purchasing materials to support working from home (such as desks), home workers will likely see household utility bills go up during this time. Consider what support you can give towards these expenses and the best timing to provide financial support (if, for example, staff are on pre-payment meters).

- **Safety.** Domestic abuse is rising in the current crisis. Consider what you as an employer can do to avoid this and address it when it happens. For more information on how to address domestic abuse, see [BITC's Domestic Abuse During COVID-19 Toolkit for Employers](#).

## 3. Adjust your communications style to reflect your new set-up

Different organisations and people have mixed levels of comfort with remote working. A frequently cited challenge is increased isolation as employees lose 'incidental' engagement with each other, such as physical cues during virtual meetings. Consider the following:

- **Explicit instructions on how you expect to interact.** Ensure different teams or colleagues that regularly work together have clear norms on how often they expect to engage with each other,





over what platform and when. This is particularly true for line management relationships, a vital element in managing the risks of isolation and low engagement in this sudden shift to widespread home working.

- **Give additional time to meeting management.**

Virtual meetings can, in some ways, level the playing field. It is harder to dominate (intentionally or otherwise) across a virtual platform and aspects of bias based on appearance can be alleviated. However, there is still ample room for employees to feel frustrated or excluded, and the drop in nonverbal cues can lead to participants talking over one another. Seek to:

- Ensure everyone attending knows what to expect on timings, agenda and format. If you expect people to have their video settings on, say so in advance and confirm participants are comfortable with that approach – not everyone wants to share their home environment with colleagues. If certain meetings are mandatory, consider any revised working patterns to ensure those juggling additional responsibilities or timetabled access to quiet space are included.
- Allow extra time for check-ins at the beginning of the meeting, ensuring everyone knows who is in the room. Reiterate expectations on how to participate (signalling you wish to speak, for example). Mention that physical cues will be less visible, so participants will need to overtly participate; consider running go-rounds, where people take it in turns to ensure everyone has airtime.
- Consider rotating chairs and asking others to take on special responsibilities within large meetings - for example, tracking the ratio of men to women speaking and sharing the data afterwards.

- **Increase the frequency of your communications.** Remote workers can find it significantly harder to stay connected with broader company news. Senior leaders should, particularly at this time of change, give dedicated time to internal communications, utilising the full suite of platforms – from email to AV content. What might feel like repetitive bulletins can ensure you connect with people who access different channels, at different times.

#### 4. Help carers care

Many employees will be juggling an increase in caring demands – nurseries and schools have shut, informal support networks, such as grandparents, are likely to be less available, while unlikely friends and family may now need support. In addition, many of your workforce are likely to be caring for an older relative, their spouse or someone close to them with a disability or a health condition, many of whom don't self-identify as carers. To ensure a company takes an inclusive approach to this consider the following:

- **Caring arrangements vary.** This is generally true across different demographic groups. In the UK, one in four families are headed by a single parent<sup>vi</sup>; while some communities have much greater expectations on looking after elder family members. Ensure any policy changes you make, including available manager support, is sensitive to individual circumstances<sup>vii</sup>. For more information, see [BITC's COVID-19: Supporting Carers in the Workplace toolkit](#).
- **People of all genders may face a changed caring arrangement.** Ensure senior leadership and managers communicate they expect men and women to adjust their working patterns to reflect this. To set an example, highlight senior leaders of both genders who have altered their hours or projects to look after their children, elderly parents and others with health conditions and disabilities.





- **Refine your carers and flexible working policies.** This is to reflect the extraordinary and unprecedented times we face. The government has recently clarified that employers can furlough workers who cannot work because of childcare issues and receive government support with this<sup>viii</sup>.

An example of adapting policy to fit the crisis comes from law firm, Eversheds Sutherland, which has extended their time off for dependants offering five days of paid leave for emergency care, offering one extra day holiday back for every four days holiday taken for caring duties, and offering flexibility around working hours to help colleagues juggle these additional new demands and pressures.

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**Footnotes:**

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.cipd.co.uk/about/media/press/020518-health-wellbeing-survey>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://thriveglobal.com/stories/managers-help-prevent-burnout-coronavirus/?utm\\_source=Newsletter\\_General&utm\\_medium=Thrive](https://thriveglobal.com/stories/managers-help-prevent-burnout-coronavirus/?utm_source=Newsletter_General&utm_medium=Thrive)

<sup>iii</sup> [BITC Factsheet Ethnicity and the economic impact of COVID-19](https://www.bitc.org.uk/factsheets/ethnicity-and-the-economic-impact-of-covid-19)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14791>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jan/31/overcrowding-social-housing-england>

**Additional resources:**

- [ACAS Homeworking - a guide for Employers and Employees](#)
- [HSE Guidance on homeworkers](#)

Adjusting communications style to reflect new set-up:

- [Catalyst: Managing remote teams inclusively](#)
- [Harvard Business Review: A guide to managing your \(newly\) remote workers](#)
- [Workplace from Facebook: Remote working resource hub](#)

Help carers care:

- [BITC Supporting carers in the workplace toolkit](#)

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/our-campaigns/we-are-the-1-in-4/>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://metro.co.uk/2020/03/23/government-wants-70s-self-isolate-asians-live-families-12406886/>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-for-wage-costs-through-the-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme>

