

# TOOLKIT

## INCLUSIVE REMOTE WORKING TOOLKIT

In April 2020, Business in the Community (BITC) published [guidance on how to take an inclusive approach to supporting your workforce](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eighteen months and three national lockdowns later – not to mention the mass disruption to our personal and professional lives – this is the updated version of that guidance. It takes into consideration what we have learned and the future of work.

### Introduction

Feeling valued and included at work has never been more important. Following the uncertainty and disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to adopt new ways of working at pace, teams that are high performing, collaborative and engaged are critical to the recovery of organisations and the economy.

But as recent research by McKinsey shows, employees are quitting or considering leaving their jobs at record levels.<sup>i</sup> The main reasons cited for this are not feeling valued by their organisation (54%) or managers (52%), or not feeling a sense of belonging at work (51%). This is more so the case with employees from ethnic minority backgrounds or those that belong to underrepresented groups.<sup>ii</sup>

However, the ability to create a sense of inclusion and belonging at work has been challenged on many fronts. The shift to widespread remote working (and hiring) has created a greater risk of exclusion taking place. Left unchecked, non-inclusive team dynamics have the potential to be amplified in a remote context, such as people interacting primarily with familiar team members rather than choosing to build new connections.<sup>iii</sup> Working remotely, using virtual technology, means

we are seeing more of each other's personal lives than previously. This risks greater unconscious bias in our decision making about colleagues, based on things such as their on-screen background, home circumstances, audio cues (e.g. accents, language used, style of speech) and how actively they participate in meetings.<sup>iv</sup>

Unprecedented levels of stress and uncertainty, combined with the rapid and necessary expansion of virtual communication technologies, has also led to new forms of non-inclusive behaviour arising, such as tensions between on-site teams and homeworkers and judgements about how frequently colleagues are now re-entering office spaces.<sup>v</sup> Incidents of virtual bullying and harassment at work are at an all-time high.<sup>vi</sup>

So how do you ensure your transition from fully remote to hybrid or office-based working remains as inclusive as possible? BITC recommends the following approach:

### 1. Continue to lead with empathy and compassion

The experience of lockdown working may feel like a distant memory, but concentrated effort still needs to be made to treat people with empathy



and compassion, especially in this period of adjustment. Employees are tired and at significant risk of burnout. Many are grieving. They want a renewed and revised sense of purpose in their work, and social and interpersonal connections with their colleagues and managers.<sup>vii</sup>

To achieve this:

- Ensure (and prioritise) regular check ins with team members.
- Ask open-ended questions about what people need, and listen and respond.
- Don't shy away from difficult conversations, and know where to point colleagues in need for further support.
- Outline what skills your line managers need within your new working model, and put a plan in place to develop these where necessary.

[For more information, see our Leading with Empathy, Compassion and Inclusion Factsheet.](#)

## 2. Include your people in your decision making

Organisations are not listening to their employees enough. Research from the University of Birmingham showed that only 38.8% of managers said their organisation conducted a consultation with employees about working preferences before making decisions on the amount of office space available.<sup>viii</sup>

Maintain and enhance the mechanisms embedded throughout the pandemic, such as greater dialogue with employee networks, regular pulse surveys, focus groups and digital feedback/suggestion boxes to engage your employees in the decision-making process, and use them to help plan and shape solutions.<sup>ix</sup> Pay particular attention to known groups most likely to leave the organisation as a result of the pandemic, such as women, parents or carers and young employees.

## 3. Check yourself and be an ally

Enabling inclusive cultures depends both on the behaviour of individuals (leaders and peers) who make conscious inclusion a daily practice, and

robust systems and processes that mitigate bias at key decision-making points.<sup>x</sup> Use your influence to harness the power of your team's diverse perspectives and enhance performance, by taking actions such as:

- Using set agendas, rotating chairs and note-takers to ensure everyone can participate in meetings.
- Draw people into conversations by asking every participant for their opinion at least once and acknowledge their answers.
- Ensure people get the credit they deserve and clarify who raised an idea. Return the conversation to someone who has been talked over or interrupted.
- Celebrating a difference in opinion when it does occur, highlighting the way different perspectives lead to the best solution
- Introduce people, especially from underrepresented groups, to help them expand their networks. Every couple of weeks, set up time to chat with at least one person you're not familiar with.
- Ask, rather than assume, about people's actions, behaviour or circumstances. If you find yourself jumping to conclusions, withhold judgement and seek to understand the reality of the situation (e.g. assuming a quieter individual has nothing to contribute).
- Proactively manage your own health and wellbeing, and avoid multi-tasking. Don't make decisions when you are too stressed, rushed, hungry or tired. Take regular breaks and maintain clear boundaries between work and home life, especially if working remotely yourself.
- Speak up when you see non-inclusive behaviour (in-person or virtually) and establish social norms within your team to celebrate inclusive behaviour or draw attention to non-inclusive behaviour in the moment, without implying judgment. For example:
  - Establishing guidelines on how to join virtual meetings in an office environment.

- Selecting a word or term to call out non-inclusive behaviour in the moment ('That's not cool').
- Establishing an end-of-week reflection to celebrate positive changes within the team and areas for continued growth, reinforcing a more inclusive environment.<sup>xi</sup>

## 4. Ensure new policies and systems are inclusive and free from bias

Organisations have had to abruptly adapt to new ways of working across the past 18 months. While this has had a positive impact to a certain extent (i.e. greater flexible and remote working in industries where this was not previously the norm, and greater location-agnostic hiring), such changes are less robustly implemented and tested than previous systems and policies, for example, in recruitment. Are you measuring and monitoring new workplace policies for their impact on certain groups?

Some things to consider:

- Who is returning to office spaces? Are there differences in this data across different diversity and intersectional characteristics? Track progression and performance management data with these cohorts to establish if there is any disadvantage to working remotely.
- Is your remote hiring policy equitable and still fit for purpose? Have you reviewed your virtual

recruitment process to check that it hasn't unintentionally created barriers for some job seekers? Check that all candidates have access to the technology needed to move through the recruitment process, and implement a standardised approach to interviewing by role (all virtual or all face-to-face) to avoid unconscious bias.

- If you have hired remote workers during the pandemic, are there any barriers to their reintegration into workplaces? Can they easily access premises where people are based? Do they know expected arrival and leave times, dress codes and other aspects of unwritten office culture?
- Does everyone have access to the correct, fully functioning technology, and are they comfortable using it? Studies show we could misjudge a person's personality (that they are less focused or competent) due to technological issues experienced on a phone call.<sup>xii</sup> Consider training and re-training employees on the technologies used in your workplace.

Have you conducted equality impact assessments on any restructuring or redundancy plans? With the end of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, we encourage employers to conduct equality impact assessments to ensure there are not disproportionate impacts on certain groups. Read more in our [Responsible Restructures Toolkit](#).

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## REFERENCES

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<sup>ii</sup> De Smet, A. Dowling, B. Mugayar-Baldocchi, M and Schaninger, B. (2021) 'Great Attrition or Great Attraction: The choice is yours', *McKinsey Quarterly*, 8<sup>th</sup> September. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/great-attrition-or-great-attraction-the-choice-is-yours>

<sup>iii</sup> Ellsworth, D. Imose, R. Madner, S and Van den Broek, R (2020) 'Sustaining and strengthening inclusion in our new remote environment', *McKinsey Insights*, 22<sup>nd</sup> July. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/sustaining-and-strengthening-inclusion-in-our-new-remote-environment>

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